WHEN THE LIGHT GOES OUT

A COLLECTION OF IRISH LIGHTHOUSE FATALITIES

COMPILED BY

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This book is dedicated to that peculiar brand of person called the lightkeeper, whose dedication to duty kept the seas safe for all

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Introduction

In hindsight, this book started out as a rather simplistic blog about lighthouses. I would visit them, tell people how to find them (believe me, that wasn't always easy in the pre-Google Maps days) and maybe give a line or two about them.

However, with a finite number of lighthouses around our coast, I could foresee a time when I would have visited them all (or the accessible ones anyway.) I included other maritime navigation beacons on the blog. I started to research deeper into the subject. I learned about lightships, I read about keepers. I discovered older lighthouses that had ceased to be. I admired the lighthouses and marveled at the names of the men who had designed them. I spoke with people around the coast who worked tirelessly and selflessly to uncover the maritime secrets of their local communities.

With all these files and folders on my C drive, I eventually thought I should write a book on Irish lighthouses. But there are only two real types of books on the subject. One picks a lighthouse on the coast and then circumnavigates the island (always in a clockwise direction) describing the facts, figures and anecdotes of all the lighthouses encountered. The other is the 'reminiscences of the lightkeeper' book. Both types are so well presented and represented, that there would be nothing I could add. I would simply be rehashing old information, contributing nothing new.

And then I realised that, through my lighthouse research, I had picked up a number of tragic stories that I had not come across anywhere else. Irish lighthouse enthusiasts may know about the Tuskar disaster of 1812, the *Puffin* and *Isolda* tragedies, Patrick Scanlan (again on the Tuskar) in 1941, Patrick Monaghan and Seamus Rohu at Blackrock and Skellig Michael respectively but did they know of Daniel Morgan at Inishtearaght or Jeremiah Calnan at Lough Mahon lighthouse? Had they even heard of Lough Mahon lighthouse?

I began to research deaths at lighthouses more thoroughly. It was not made easy by the Commissioner of Irish Lights having their archives out of bounds for an indefinite period while a team of archivists sorted and catalogued but I had the Irish newspapers to pore over. More and more came to light and so I had to place strict parameters on the search.

Rule 1 – It had to be an Irish lighthouse. As was only to be expected, I came across wonderfully spectacular lighthouse deaths outside of Ireland – the murder of two keepers in the Sea of Marmora in Turkey in 1866; the disappearance of three keepers on the Flannan Isles in Scotland; Winstanley on the Eddystone; keepers eaten by cannibals on Sokotin Island in the Indian Ocean; and so on. These stories will need to be collated by someone else.

Rule 2 – The lighthouse had to be central to the story. There are plenty of incidents of ships running aground at or near lighthouses, so I would need to restrict the criteria. So basically, keepers, attendants, keepers' families, ferry contactors and tradesmen only. Alas, the wonderful story of William McCall fishing at Fannet lighthouse, who put a fish's head in his mouth to kill it and it dived down his throat, could not be included.

Another reason for this rule was that I was looking to shed a light (pun intended) on some of the lesser-known lighthouses around our coast. The latent interest in our lighthouses has been well tapped by the Great Lighthouses of Ireland project and fair

play to C.I.L. for doing so. The ensuing RTE documentary was extremely successful, showing that lighthouses have long played a romantic role in the public's imagination.

But whereas the publicity department is keen to attract visitors to lighthouses that can maximise tourist potential, the public is often unaware of the 'Not-so-great lighthouse' in his or her locality. Why is Valentia 'great' and Balbriggan isn't? Part of the reason for this book is to highlight (the puns get worse) the lesser-known lighthouses, some of them actually no longer in existence. In a perverse sort of a way, I am slightly sorry that there were no fatalities (that I am aware of) at Scattery Island lighthouse or Mutton Island or Drogheda because there are plenty of lighthouses that deserve a good showcasing.

Rule 3 – There must be a story to the fatality. A lot of these stories are accidental deaths. In some, the deceased certainly contributed to his downfall. In a couple, foul play is suspected. I hesitated about including 'natural causes' but decided to do so, on the condition that the story increases our knowledge and understanding of the lightkeeper's life. In the nineteenth century, when life expectancy was low, many people died at lighthouses just as they died in pawnbrokers or banks but, with lighthouses, many deaths were caused due to the lack of local medical assistance.

There were three ways I could have presented this compendium – geographically; by category (freak waves, drownings, falls etc.); or chronologically. In the end, I chose the latter and hope it provides a history (of sorts) of lightkeeping down through the years.

I am under no illusion that this book provides a comprehensive list of deaths at Irish lighthouse. Without the Commissioner of Irish Lights' assistance, I expect to be pulled up over some fatality that simply never came up. This book is littered with the caveat '*as far as I know*' because I can never say definitively that I have the whole story.

An example of this lies in a wonderful short story by the eminent author, Monica Corish. She retells the tale, told to her by her lightkeeping family, of a baby girl stillborn on Black Rock (Mayo) with no facility for burial and the relief boat held up for a long time by bad weather. There are also graveyards on places like Eagle Island, Tory Island and Inishtrahull, whose occupants may never give up their stories.

This book is not a definitive history. Believe it or not, newspapers occasionally get things wrong and maybe certain details are incorrect, though I have tried, where possible, to double-check and cross-reference. Nor is it an academic work, though I have researched the subject thoroughly. My style of writing is deliberately light-hearted, despite the often heart-breaking stories. But the book is designed to entertain as much as inform and I hope it does both. All errors, I accept, are mine.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to the victims featured in the pages of this book and hope it provides something of a roll of honour for these very special people. Whether a keeper, a lightshipman, a keeper's son or daughter or wife, a painter or a builder, or a ferry contractor, they all knew the risks involved in their chosen profession. Some, as I said, may have contributed to their demise by making small (or large) errors of judgements but, in an environment of freak weather and capricious seas, they all knew the dangers but persevered to keep the mariner safe.

And paid the ultimate price for it.

Peter Goulding (February 2022)

A note on sources

I have listed the specific sources of each story at the end of each chapter, unless mentioned in the text. For historical and technical information on individual lighthouses, the website of the Commissioner of Irish Lights was widely consulted, as was my original lighthouse bible, Russ Rowlett's online Lighthouse Directory.

In addition to these, I would like to acknowledge the help gleaned from the following publications, which were consulted for lighthouse information and also for specific stories:

- *The Lighthouses of Ireland* by Richard M. Taylor
- *Bright Light, White Water* by Bill Long
- *Light in the Darkness* by Liam Clarke
- *Extraordinary Skellig* by Des Lavelle
- *The Irish Lighthouse Service by T.G. Wilson*

To avoid constant repetition, where these sources were consulted, I have not listed them at the end of every chapter.

I would also like to acknowledge the descendants of the families involved who were almost universal in their desire to help in my quest for photographs and further information to help keep the memory of their ancestors alive.

This book would not have been possible without the work of Frank Pelly and Michael Costelloe, two men criminally overlooked for their preservation of lighthouse history in this country at a time when it certainly was not fashionable. Without their work, much lighthouse history could well have been lost forever.

And there are certain local historians around the country who do trojan work researching and collating maritime history and who, frankly, are an inspiration to me. They have all helped in some way in the production of this book.

- Andrew Doherty (Cheekpoint)
- John McCarron (West Inishowen)
- Martin Doherty (Derry)
- Gerard Butler (former keeper)
- Seamus Bovaird (Inishowen)
- Richard Cummins (former keeper)
- Simon Coate (Dun Laoghaire)
- Rosemarie Geraghty (Blacksod)

Unattributed photographs are from my own collection.

Cover photograph: Greenore lighthouse, county Louth

The Pidgeon family, Poolbeg

The construction of Dublin's Great South Wall was, and still is, one of Ireland's greatest feats of engineering.

It was way back in 1715 when, in order to circumvent the problem of silting at the mouth of the Liffey, the authorities instructed the newly created Ballast Committee to build an embankment from the city quays three miles out into Dublin Bay. The original wall was built of timber piles weighted down with baskets (or kishes) of gravel. It was completed in 1730 and, when the timber showed signs of rotting in 1760, it was decided to strengthen it with concrete blocks. At the same time, it was decided to build a permanent lighthouse, the Poolbeg light, at the end of the wall to replace the lightship that had stood guard at the spot since 1736.

Because the wall was so long, the transportation of tools to the end of the construction was a problem, so it was decided to build a wooden storehouse roughly half a mile from the end with basic accommodation for a caretaker. The caretaker appointed by the Ballast Committee was one John Pidgeon (with a 'd'), his wife and three children, Ned, Mary and Rachel.

The lighthouse was first lit on 29th September 1767 and claims to be the first in the world to use candlepower, rather than coal (though it must be said that St. Catharine's nunnery in Youghal used candles as an aid to maritime navigation from 1190 to the 1500s!) And the first lightkeeper at Poolbeg, in addition to his caretaking duties, was John Pidgeon.

Dublin Harbour from Poolbeg lighthouse by Jonathan Fisher, published 1792

Another responsibility of the Pidgeons was to keep a look out for persons in distress on the river. The Pidgeon's house was a lonely spot, where boats both large and small tended to get caught out in bad weather and their house was often used as a temporary refuge. In recognition of this, the Ballast Committee extended the house to consist of eight rooms and three lofts

John and his wife were resourceful people and, with the mailboat from Holyhead landing at their small pier, there were a lot of weary passengers who could murder a cup of tea after a journey of up to two or three days. And there was great curiosity in Dublin too, with landed gentlemen riding or sailing out to see this newly completed marvel of engineering that was the Great South Wall.

The couple soon began to provide tea, cockles and mussels, other light refreshments and maybe something a little stronger and found themselves sitting on a goldmine. They converted part of the house into a restaurant and John and Ned organised tours in their rowing boat of the Wall. With the beautiful Georgian streetscapes springing up in the city, tourists from across Europe flocked into the capital and very few did not pause for some libation at the 'd'-less Pigeon House, as it quickly became known.

Unfortunately for the Pidgeons, they fell off the pig's back with a terrible thump one night in 1786. The new light had been lit with spermaceti oil and the customers had left on their horses or in their carriages. Suddenly, the Pidgeons heard cries of distress from the river and rushed outside to aid four strangers in a small boat who had got into difficulty.

They helped the men into the restaurant and suddenly found themselves under attack, as the men drew their sabres and demanded money. They tied the elderly couple up and then went on a rampage. Ned rushed into the fray when one of his sisters was attacked by a man with a sword and suffered a terrible wound to his hand. The raiders looted everything they could find and made their escape by the small boat they had arrived in. As they did so, they scuttled the Pidgeon's pleasure-boat to prevent them being followed.

The shock felt in the city the following morning was palpable. The Great Wall was thronged with people who came out to console the well-liked family and a subscription was raised for a new pleasure-boat. Sadly, the events took their toll on the family. The elderly John Pidgeon, numbed by the shock and trauma of the cowardly attack, died shortly afterwards. Dublin Port noted in August 1786 that he was old and unable to work and also that he died in early September the same year. Ned's wounds did not heal and he too succumbed. And finally, the grief-stricken and traumatised Mrs. Pidgeon also fell victim to the night's events.

The two girls carried on the business until, one night, they again heard cries of distress from a boat on the river. Their naturally decent instincts overcame their fear and they rescued the three shipwrecked mariners – a sea captain, a wealthy Philadelphia widower and his three-year-old son – and cared for them at the Pigeon House until they had recovered. In a scenario that could have been dreamt up at *Mills and Boon*, the widower fell in love with Mary, married her and brought her and Rachel back to America. Rachel too, it is said, also found a husband in the New World.

There is another version of the story regarding the night of the attack and its aftermath. While food was being prepared for the four villains, one of the men removed his hat and it was noticed that he had a large growth, like a boil, on his head.

In this version of events, neither father nor son died directly as a result of their injuries and, when a new pleasure-boat had been acquired (thanks to the subscriptions of the Pigeon House regulars), Ned and his father took the boat out again.

Because of his maimed hand, Ned could only take the tiller, while his father threw a fishing line over the side. Imagine his astonishment when he hooked, not a sea trout or another tasty morsel, but a recently deceased corpse. The two men immediately recognised the dead man as one of the gang who had ransacked the place a few nights previously. The mystery deepened when a second member of the gang was washed ashore a short time afterwards.

During the winter, John Pidgeon died and, when summer came around, Ned, whose hand was now rotting away, was obliged to hire two men to help row the boat while he collected the money. One day, as the threesome were eating lunch, Ned noticed a jack-knife on the seat beside one of the men. Recognising it as his father's own knife, he snatched it up and apprehended the man before bringing him to the authorities. Removing the man's hat, they saw he had a large boil-like growth on his head.

The man was tried, found guilty and sentenced to hang. With nothing to lose, he confessed to the robbery and said there had been a falling-out with his three companions over the division of the loot and he was the only survivor. His boat had capsized and he was picked up by a smuggler for whom he worked until injured one day. Being unable to work at sea, he gained employment by applying to Ned for a job on the rowing boat. It was probably not the greatest career move ever made.

In this version of the tale, Ned died on the operating table and Mrs. Pidgeon shortly afterwards. The Pigeon House was transformed into a hotel, then was taken over by a fort and currently belongs to the Electrical Supply Board, who also own the two iconic, if disused, barbershop towers that dominate Dublin's skyline.

The Pigeon House today
(*Photo © kevin higgins (cc-by-sa/2.0)*

Sources:
Caledonian Mercury 11th November 1767
The Tale of the Pidgeons by Turtle Bunbury (2009)
Murder Mysteries at the South Wall by Paula Boden, *Newsfour* (2017)
A History of the Port of Dublin by H.A. Gilligan

The Tuskar Rock construction

A nasty little group of rocks lying seven miles off the south-east point of Ireland had, for many years, been responsible for more shipwrecks than you could throw your hat over. Lying on the main transatlantic route from ports such as Liverpool and Dublin, the Tuskar rocks marked the beginning of a most treacherous area of sea off the south Wexford coast. Because of this, when, in 1810, the Corporation for Improving the Port of Dublin (known as The Ballast Board) took over the responsibility for navigational lights around the coast of Ireland, Tuskar Rock was identified as a priority for a lighthouse.

The position of Tuskar Rock (courtesy Mapcarta)

By August 1811, the rock, whose surface area comprises roughly two acres, had been surveyed by the Ballast Board's new inspector, George Halpin, and the plans, with some modifications in the design, were approved by Trinity House. Halpin, in his first major challenge, supervised the Board's workmen and work began in earnest in 1812, with large blocks of Dalkey granite being used in the construction.

The lighthouse would be 110 feet tall, built up in one-foot courses, six storeys to the balcony and a further 20 feet above. Lead would be inserted into the joints for the first sixteen feet from the foundation upwards to substantially stabilise the base of the tower.

The workforce, of around twenty-four, was made up of skilled workers brought down from Dublin and local workers from Wexford, under the watchful eye of John Needham, an eminent architect.

The first task for the men was to build themselves accommodation on the rock, to avoid having to return to the mainland after each day's work. This was done by laying horizontal bars across the northern part of the rock and then keeping them in place

using iron clamps. A platform was then erected on the bars, upon which three wooden huts for supplies and up to forty workmen were constructed.

Shortly after this, in May 1812, a Westindiaman, the *Irlam*, bound for Liverpool from Barbados with a cargo of sugar and cotton, struck the rock at four o'clock in the morning. It was later said that Captain Keyzar was unfamiliar with this stretch of coast. The *Irlam* plied her trade between Liverpool and Barbados and made a name for herself for capturing other ships and plundering their treasures. It is difficult to say whether the boat was unlucky to strike the rock before the lighthouse had been built, or lucky to strike it when there were so many hands on the rock to effect a rescue.

Aside from the valuable cargo, there was, on board, a large detachment of the 16th (Bedfordshire) Regiment of foot commanded by one Captain Hall, ten officers and sixty-two rank and file and thirty-two women and children, some mere infants, who were the wives and children of the soldiers.

With the bottom of the ship being constantly torn on the jagged rocks and the crew and passengers unable to reach safety through the boiling surf, it seemed for a while that all hands would be lost, as the water poured in through the hull at a frightening rate. Indeed, several people, including four children were trapped below decks and drowned. Everybody else went up on deck and clung to the rigging, praying for salvation.

Fortunately, their prayers were answered by the workmen on the rock, who came to their rescue. Over one hundred men, women and children – many of them half-naked – tied ropes around their waists and were hauled one by one onto the desolate island. The infants, one of whom had been born on the voyage, were wrapped in potato sacks and transported the same way.

The rude workmen's huts, devoid of furnishings and spare clothing were only a small step up for the survivors from the wreck of the *Irlam*. Shivering and shocked, they appreciated their saviours' help but they were glad when a brig chanced by and picked up many of the passengers. The remaining thirty people stayed on the Tuskar for two further nights until they were brought to Wexford by a local boatman.

If the workmen on the rock thought that they would get their reward in heaven for their heroics, they probably didn't think that it would come so soon for so many of them.

On Sunday night October 18th 1812, the twenty-five workmen had retired to their huts. Work on the lighthouse had been progressing steadily and the tower had been built to a height of six feet. Towards midnight, a storm brewed up, one of the worst in living memory. The wind from the S.S.E. blew a perfect hurricane and the Atlantic surge was frightening. At around four o'clock, those that were sleeping were woken by a tremendous crash as a wave struck the huts. Instantly the wooden boards, on which the men were sleeping, started to float. With a yell, men rushed for the door and clambered out into the wild night, making for the highest point of the island, some forty feet above the high water mark. As they did so, there came another tremendous crash and, turning around, they saw that the huts, which still contained some of their workmates, had completely disappeared, washed away into the black ocean.

There was nothing that the remaining workmen could do. Half-dressed in the biting October wind, they grabbed ropes and lashed themselves to giant stones,

weighing a ton and a half each, that were due to be used in the lighthouse construction. All the while, the tide increased. The huge rocks, to which some of the men were lashed, were picked up by the sea and tossed about as if they were pebbles. Some of the men were killed, either crushed by the rocks or drowned when torn from their hold and catapulted into the ocean.

In the lull between the waves, the surviving men ran back to where their huts had stood and lashed themselves to the iron bars that had previously held the platform in place. Then the next wave would roll in, crashing ten feet over them. Hour after hour they remained like this, ill-dressed and drenched to the skin until at last the tide began to recede.

Tuskar Rock lighthouse today

They took this hiatus as an opportunity to fasten a cable as tightly as possible between two ring bolts and to tie smaller ropes around their waists, which they then attached to the cable. In this way, they survived the next high tide. After this, they decided to seek the shelter of the lighthouse tower and it was here that they were found, mercifully alive, at eleven o'clock on the Wednesday morning, when the tempest had abated enough to allow the lighthouse tender to sail. The eleven survivors had had nothing to eat since two o'clock on Sunday afternoon and were in a pitiable condition. One had a broken leg but all were injured in some way.

The fourteen men who died on Tuskar Rock were – John Needham (inspector), Patrick Byrne, Samuel Cooke, John Keoghoe, Philip Brady, John Salmon, Miles Ryan and John Keogh (all from Dublin) and Richard Meyler, John Edward, William Bishop, William Devereux, Jasper (or Josiah) Corish and James Nowlan (from Wexford.)

The eleven survivors were William Moore, Andrew Kinshela, Edward Breen, Walter Walsh, James Fitzpatrick, Michael Ryan, Bryan Carroll and John Kavanagh (from Dublin) and T. Barrington, Patrick Dillon and Nicholas Cahill (from Wexford).

The number of victims and survivors varies according to the source. Irish Lights, for example, goes with ten victims and fourteen survivors.

Despite modern-day folklore, the survivors were not expected to return to work after recuperating from their injuries. Many, indeed were given jobs as lightkeepers, some holding these positions for forty years. Pensions were given to the widows and children of the men killed. A report by the Commissioners declared that the amount paid out to the '*Tusker* (sic) *pensioners*' in 1826 amounted to £62 19s 10d.

Work was abandoned for the season on the Tuskar. Inspector Halpin recruited more men, an experienced workforce that, after completing Tuskar, travelled around the country building many lighthouses. One who didn't follow his companions was stone-cutter Nicholas Cahill, one of the 1812 survivors, who fell to his death from the nearly completed Tuskar tower on 22nd August 1814.

At length, the new light shone forth on 4th June 1815.

Plaque in the Tuskar Memorial Park above Rosslare

Sources:
Lloyd's List 21st March 1809
Royal Jamaica Gazette 1st August 1812
The Sun 28th October 1812
The Caledonian Mercury 5th November 1812
Belfast Commercial Chronicle 31st October 1812 and others
The Irish Builder 15th March 1880
Sunday Independent 7th October 2018

Peter Cane, Skellig Michael

Ir lost his life upon the western main,
Skillig's high cliffs the hero's bones contain.

So perished Ir, son of Milesius, after whom Ireland was allegedly named. He died in a shipwreck, in one of those fierce storms for which the south-western part of this country has long been famous, possibly for want of a lighthouse. Thousands of years later, one Peter Cane, also left his bones on Skellig Michael, (though in not quite so intact a fashion as his nation-naming predecessor) in the construction of the long-awaited lighthouse.

Skellig Michael, the larger of the two Skellig islands, eight miles off the coast of county Kerry, had, for many years, been championed as the best place for a lighthouse on the completely unlighted part of the coast between Kinsale and Loop Head. It is famous for its ancient oratory and beehive cells high up on the craggy cliff; famous for its puffins and other seabirds that sit contentedly on the cliff face watching weary day-trippers trudge the six hundred steps up the rock; and recently it has achieved new fame for being a location in the later films of the *Star Wars* franchise.

By 1820, when work finally got under way in constructing not one, but two, lighthouses on the distant rock, the monks had long departed, and the pilgrimages had all but ceased. As a rare traveller in 1825 remarked, *"the stormy waves often rendered access impossible; even when the sea was calm, their rugged and precipitous forms frowned destruction on the little bark beneath and the sea-fowl screamed and fluttered as if with warning voice around them. Verdure there was none to soothe the eye of the weary pilgrim; all was nakedness and barren rock towering above the ceaseless roar of the water,"* a passage which probably would not get him a job in the tourist office in Portmagee.

Onto this barren rock, came a gang of workmen, under the direction of George Halpin of the Ballast Board. They moved into the beehive cells and stored their gunpowder in the oratory as they began over five years of digging and blasting and building to construct the two lighthouses.

The landing place at the north end of the island had already been constructed by the monks and required relatively few modifications but, as one progressed further to the other end of the island, where the two lighthouses were to be constructed, one 745 feet below the other, there was a greater need for intensive blasting.

By 1823, the roads were being cut and prepared, both the one to the far side of the island and also the one linking the two lighthouses. Blasting necessitated sending thousands of tons of rock tumbling into the sea below and was a very dangerous job.

One of the blasters was a man called Peter Cane. He may also have been called Kain, or Kane or Cain – the spelling varied as to whoever was writing down the name. Des Lavelle, writing in "*Skellig – Experience the Extraordinary,*" says that he was a local man from Portmagee, so 'Keane' might well have been another spelling variation! He was a married man with a young family and on 16th November 1825, he met his explosive end.

His death was mentioned fifty-five years later by John Swan Sloane, who by that time was a retired chief engineer from Irish Lights and who seems to have spent a lot of time railing against his former employers in *The Irish Builder*.

"A workman, a blaster, named Peter Cane, in trying to fire a 'shot' that had missed, was blown into the air; not a particle of him could be found, but his vest was found buttoned and with a comparatively small hole in the back. I find, on referring to my notes, that the spirited and generous service in which he lost his life allowed his widow the princely pension of £5 10s 8d per annum. O tempora! O mores! could they not have made it half-a-crown a week - was ever known such misery?"

Peter's widow, Mary Cane, who was thirty years old at the time of the accident, was still receiving this 'princely pension' in 1859. CIL say she was also awarded £3 per year for any of her children under sixteen years of age but does not specify the number of children.

Two months after his untimely death – is death by explosion ever anything other than 'untimely'? – the lower lighthouse was completed and ready to receive the lantern. The upper lighthouse was constructed by the end of the year, though not before a rather strange, anonymous letter, was syndicated to many major newspapers –

"*There are about forty workmen now on the Skellig Rock … nearly a month without victuals or firing, and the weather is so bad that no relief can be given them. The signal of death is constantly flying from the rocks. Two men escaped about a fortnight ago by jumping off and were most miraculously saved by the relief boat, though she could not approach the rock. The account the men give of their fellow-sufferers' privations is melancholy. This dreadful rock is exposed to the whole fury of the Western Ocean. The surge sometimes rises 200 feet above the rock."*

Unfortunately, this terrible suffering is not corroborated by any other source. One suspects the hand of a disgruntled employee in the letter.

A portion of the blasted roadway on Skellig Michael (photograph courtesy of Des Lavelle)

Sources:
The Irish Builder 1st May 1880

Michael Wishart, Skellig Michael

The story of Michael Wishart's life is very much a roller-coaster of experiences, rising to prominence and falling spectacularly off the pinnacles he had attained. Not once but twice. And his final fall from a cliff top was the physical representation of his fall from grace.

We first meet him as 'an amiable, young man,' playing a leading role in one of the great stories of lighthouse engineering history, the construction of the Bell Rock, or Inchcape, lighthouse off the eastern coast of Scotland. Michael was evidently a Scottish carpenter, possibly from Strathmiglo, Fife, who had risen, in a short space of time, to become one of the principal builders of this wave-washed tower, which is still standing firm after over 200 years.

He was well respected by Robert Stevenson, the architect, a member of the famous lighthouse building family and grandfather of the novelist Robert Louis Stevenson. In this favoured position, he was well aware of being a part of history. The edifice is one of the great lighthouses of the world and Michael's fame was set to be cemented in its sturdy foundations.

Unfortunately, this all came crashing down around him on the last day of June 1809. Eight levels of the lighthouse had been built and the movable crane had to be moved up to the ninth level. The higher the building rose, the more arduous the moving of the crane became, and all hands were called upon to heave the ropes into position.

But one rope, by an oversight, lay ignored and, because of this, the large crane slowly toppled over. With panicked cries, workmen ran in every direction to escape its deadly fall and with one exception, they succeeded.

Michael Wishart, however, was unfortunate enough to stumble over an uncut trenail[1] and fell on his back. Amazingly, he landed in a narrow gap between the crane and its movable beam but his legs became trapped in the crane's wheels as it fell.

When the dust settled, the workmen quickly hauled him out and did their best to staunch the flow of blood from his mangled legs. They got him up onto a stretcher and put him on a boat to the mainland, where the first person he encountered was Robert Stevenson, just arrived, and somewhat nonplussed by the absence of a crane on top of his lighthouse out in the sea. He instructed the crew that the pale but robust Wishart was to be brought immediately to Arbroath and no expense was to be spared in surgical aid.

Stevenson visited him in hospital a few days later when a double amputation was still on the cards. Realising his career as a builder was over, Wishart asked him for a job as a lightkeeper when he had fully recovered.

And Stevenson acceded to his request. Wishart spent 58 weeks recovering from his terrible injuries, cared for many months by one Elizabeth Paris. The Bell Rock lighthouse was first lit on 1st February 1811 and two months later, Michael Wishart, took up his duties as 'principal assistant' to Principal Keeper John Reid. It was a four-keeper station with three men always at the light at any one time.

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[1] a wooden peg or dowel used to bind two or more pieces of wood together. Sadly, I doubt it is a typo for 'toenail.'

It is a mark of Wishart's standing with Robert Stevenson that, when the latter, drew up a map of the Bell Rock, naming all the features for friends and colleagues, *Wishart's Ledge* appeared on it.

Plate VI of 'An Account of the Bell Rock Lighthouse' by Robert Stevenson

He married one Ann Reid (the boss's sister?) on 7th January 1812 in Arbroath and a son Robert was born that October. Sometime after that, he moved to being the live-in keeper at the Kilwarlin (aka the South Rock) light off the coast of county Down. It was certainly unusual – if not unheard of - for a keeper to be transferred from one lighthouse board to another. Doubtless Stevenson had something to do with it. He was on good terms with George Halpin of the Ballast Board and maybe Halpin mentioned that he was looking for a keeper at Kilwarlin, a wave-washed lighthouse very similar to the Bell Rock.

Kilwarlin had been the baby of Thomas Rogers who was the lighthouse contractor for the Revenue Commissioners and had responsibility for lighthouses around the coast of Ireland in the 1790s. Although the Bell Rock claims to be the oldest wave-washed lighthouse still standing in the world, Kilwarlin beats it by fourteen years, though the latter is now long discontinued.

Rogers' lighthouses were functional but the keepers were poorly paid and had correspondingly low standards and in 1810, Rogers' services were dispensed with, as the Ballast Board began revolutionising the lighthouse service under their new Inspector, George Halpin snr.

New lighthouse technology was due to be rolled out and Halpin recommended that all the old keepers who were too long in the tooth to accept change in both technology and standards should be pensioned off at full pay. The remainder of the keepers, together with all new recruits, would have to undergo new certification, which would, on completion, render them qualified for lightkeeping duties. The new instructor would be Michael Wishart and he alone would be responsible for issuing certificates of competence.

Michael had moved from Kilwarlin to the Baily Lighthouse by this stage. It was a fortunate move as it placed him directly in the gaze of the incoming regime and Halpin in particular. His new role came with an extra £30 per annum in wages and the world was his oyster.

We next find him off the county Wexford coast in 1821 at the newly erected Tuskar lighthouse. Maybe his experience at Kilwarlin made people think he was the perfect choice for principal keeper at this most important of lighthouses. His assistant keeper was former Ballast Board tradesman, Charles Hunter.

The posting did not have a happy ending, culminating in one of the great stories in Irish lighthouse history.

A smuggler, known only as M.H., left Le Havre in France with a cargo of contraband in his cutter, '*Shark.*' He made the coast of Wexford in three days and, on the morning of the fourth day, put in at Tuskar Rock. The coastguards were active AT Rosslare Fort at the entrance to Wexford harbour and, to avoid detection, M.H. decided to leave his contraband on the Tuskar in the care of the lightkeepers, promising them 'a little present' if it remained untouched.

This he did, unloading his cargo of one large cask and several small kegs of brandy, forty pounds of sperm candles and playing cards (all dutiable goods) with the small crane on the pier. He then set sail for Wexford, was boarded by the Customs who found nothing and was allowed to proceed on his way.

M.H. then found out that the relief boat was due to send out new keepers to the rock on the following Tuesday, so he made plans to collect his property on the Monday night. He locked one of his crew with a lantern inside a bathing box at Ballytrent, with a hole drilled in it, where coastguards frequently patrolled. And then he set off for the Tuskar in a whaleboat.

Arriving at the lighthouse, he was surprised to find it unlit. He entered the tower and found Hunter lying on his back and Wishart on his side. They were both dead drunk, having *'tapped the Admiral,'* as M.H. eloquently put it. Leaving them there, M.H. and his crew loaded up what remained of the haul and, on receiving the signal from the bathing box that the coastguards had gone home for the night, ran the boat safely up on the beach.

All might have turned out all right if, by chance, a squadron of ships escorting King George IV had not passed by that very night. It is a cardinal sin in the lighthouse service for a light to remain unlit during the hours of darkness and this state of affairs was duly reported to the lighthouse authorities.

At the subsequent inquiry, Hunter, who had been a blacksmith in the employ of the Ballast Board prior to his promotion to assistant lightkeeper, was returned to his original position, for *'permitting the brandy to be landed on the rock.'* Michael Wishart was demoted to assistant keeper (without any possibility of re-promotion) for not informing the Ballast Board for a month that the contraband had been landed.

This would seem to indicate that Wishart did not know of the scheme until it was a *fait accompli*, which is entirely possible, though it slightly contradicts M.H.'s statement that he spoke to both keepers prior to landing the goods. Most commentators quote Wishart's 'indirect involvement' in the affair, though it is unlikely that Hunter forced the brandy down his neck. And allowing the light to remain unlit would normally have merited prompt dismissal.

The landing place at the Tuskar c.1904 (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

History has slightly muddied the waters of Michael Wishart's next move but he was definitely stationed on Inishtrahull Island in 1824, supplementing his living by curing fish for the islanders and growing turnip and cabbage in the lighthouse garden there. The lights on Skellig Michael were first exhibited on 4th December 1826 and it is probable he was one of the first keepers at this new station.

Sadly, the precise date of his demise cannot be determined though most accounts say he died before the end of the decade. Pensions were subsequently paid to his wife Dora (Ann had doubtless passed on) and also to his son, John, who was born in August 1829.

According to Robert Callwell, Commissioner of the Ballast Board, in his personal diary – but not recorded in the official minutes – Michael Wishart was killed by falling off a cliff, while cutting grass for his cow.

As Des Lavelle says, in his wonderfully definitive, *"Skellig – Experience the Extraordinary," "It must have taken considerable labour to land a cow on Skellig – presumably by means of a manual cargo derrick at Cross Cove. It also called for considerable imagination as to how a cow might access grazing of any sort!"* The island is known more for its rockiness rather than its luxuriant foliage and a cow would be singularly unsuited to the steep inclines of the island. Maybe Michael kept his cow in a shed near the house? It would explain why he was cutting grass for it.

Whatever the logistics of keeping a cow on the island, it was a rather sad and ignominious end for a man who had showed so much promise. His partner in crime, Charles Hunter, retired in 1850 and received a pension of £26 per year for old age, length of service and inability to work.

Sources:
The Irish Builder 15th March 1880
Beam Magazine 25 article by Frank Pelly
Irish Examiner 18th November 1974
An Account of the Bell Rock Lighthouse by Robert Stevenson
Genealogical information from Scott Wishart
The Book of Inishtrahull by Sean Beattie

Slyne Head, the early deaths

From the very outset, Slyne Head appears to have been a very dangerous place to work, judging by the number of people that were killed in its construction.

Set on the far edge of Connemara, it marks the very northern entrance to Galway Bay. The lighthouses at Mutton Island, on the approach to the town of Galway itself, and at Inis Mór on the Aran Islands, had already been established. Representations had been made to have a lighthouse erected on Slyne Head since 1813 but it was not until 1830 that the Ballast Office of Dublin announced that it intended to construct two lighthouses at 'Emmill Island', the only appellation of this kind I can find. This was obviously an anglicisation of Illaunamid (or Illaunimul, as the Admiralty charts had it)

Slyne Head is not a solid headland but an archipelago of rocks and small islands of which Illaunamid is the outermost. As such, it bears the brunt of the massive waves rolling in from the Atlantic, as many of the west coast lighthouses do. And the sprinkling of islands between it and the coast creates channels and currents that can catch even the most experienced boatman unawares.

The nearest town of any note is Clifden and the journey across Connemara and then from Clifden to the small slip at Slackport at the end of the mainland was arduous in the extreme. One's tribulations were not over by any means as there was still the boat journey to the island to negotiate and it was this boat journey that seemed to have been responsible for many of the fatalities at Slyne Head.

Work started in 1831 to build not one, but two lighthouses, to differentiate the station from the single lights at Inis Mór and Clare Island. Originally, the idea was to have two revolving lights but somewhere along the journey, this got changed to one static light and one revolving light.

There is a remarkable lack of newspaper reporting of any of the early fatal incidents at Slyne Head, maybe because of the remoteness of the location. But, to do justice to the dead, we will try and name those people that we know who died trying to bring light to this part of the coast.

The first of these, that we know of, occurred early in the build when, according to the Slyne Head page on the Commissioner of Irish Lights site, *"a man by the name of Hallam lost his life whilst carrying stores - his wife and four children were awarded twenty guineas."*

The second incident comes from an 1859 Report, detailing to whom Irish Lights were paying pensions. There is listed an Anne Walsh, whose son, John Walsh, was killed at Slyne Head. The date from which the pension was awarded was 7th February 1833, which may or may not have been the date of the accident. She received the pitiable sum of £6 per annum as compensation for her loss.

Back to the C.I.L. webpage and we find there was a terrible tragedy on 27th March 1836, when the lighthouses were practically completed. It seems a boat overturned and eight men were drowned, an incident that was to be repeated sixteen years later (*see page 43*). The Ballast Board were all heart, awarding £6 per annum to the two widows, one of whom also lost a son. There was a £3 per annum award to all children under sixteen years of age and a charitable donation was made of £3 to each of three sisters who had been supported by one of the drowned men.

Sadly, none of the men are named but we may surmise that one of them was named P. Conroy, for an M. Conroy was still receiving £6 per year in 1858 after the drowning of her husband in 1836. Four young Kennedy children are also listed in the 1844 pensions list.

The final fatal incident (again, 'that we know of') at Slyne Head occurred after the establishment of the lights. In early August 1838, the head lightkeeper, one W. Rivett was fishing on a rock near the lighthouse. This, of course, would not have been the peaceful pastime that it is today but a vital part of the lightkeepers' duties on a rock station. The lack of fresh meat meant that isolated keepers had to supplement their rations almost in a hunter-gatherer sort of a way. Collecting birds' eggs was a way of life, fishing another. A big, fat seagull doubtless found its way into the pot on occasions.

Mr. W. Rivett was probably the original head lightkeeper at Slyne Head, despite the fact that he only had an initial for a first name. He was married and had a young family who lived with him at the lighthouse, a tough existence on a tiny island often battered by storms and gigantic waves.

Tragically, it appears that one of these waves caught Mr. Rivett as he was fishing and he was swept off his rock into the foaming ocean. It was reported that all attempts to help him were unsuccessful, which suggests that he was clearly visible from the lighthouse.

The body was washed up on the 11th August at Omey Island on the other side of Clifden Bay. Omey Island is a tidal island (it is possible to walk over the sand to it at low tide) and it had a population of nearly 400 in 1841, when it was owned by Walter Bodkin Esq. These days, it is uninhabited. From the island's southern and western shores, the twin towers of Slyne Head can be clearly seen on the horizon.

Mr. Rivett was buried in the small graveyard on Omey Island by the two assistant lightkeepers, Reilly and King, under the supervision of the Rev. Foster, rector of the parish of Omey. (The name King is synonymous with Slyne Head. It was the family that had the contract for the relief and supply of the lighthouse for many years and members of the family may have served there as lightkeepers from time to time.)

His widow, Mary, (at least blessed with a first name) was awarded an annual pension of £6 per year, which she was still drawing in 1858. Their three girls, Ellen (born July 1834), Mary (March 1837) and Louisa (born after her father's death in January 1839) each received the customary £3 per annum until they reached maturity.

Sources:
Freeman's Journal 23rd August 1838
Waterford Mail 25th August 1838 and others
Report from the Select Committee on Lighthouses 1844
Report of the Commissioners reported to inquire into the condition and management of Lights, Buoys and Beacons 1861

Five lives lost, Tory Island

The lighthouse at the western end of Tory Island, first established in 1832. For many years it was painted black but gained its white stripe in the 1950s.

From the Londonderry Journal, Tuesday 5th May 1835

Melancholy Catastrophe – On the 22nd ult., at the hour of twelve o'clock noon, as the market boat belonging to the island of Torry, (sic) *in the employ of the lighthouse lately erected there, was proceeding from the mainland to the light-house, it was swamped in crossing the bar of Ballynass, and all on board, consisting of a crew of four men, one passenger and both the light-keepers' wives, were precipitated into the deep. Mr. Robinson, who was an eye-witness of the melancholy occurrence, immediately repaired to the Coast Guard station and gave information of the fact and, the boat having been launched with the least possible delay, Mr. Hugh Derraugh, commissioned boatman, with two of his crew and two volunteers, put off and, at imminent risk to their own lives, rescued Bryan and William Doohar, brothers, who were clinging to the bottom of the upset boat, from their perilous situation – five of their unhappy companions, however, met with a watery grave. The exertions of Mr. Derraugh and his companions were most praiseworthy; and the hazard they incurred will be more palpable, when we inform our readers that, from the boisterous state of the weather, they were compelled to take refuge in one of the islands of the bay until next day, not being able to make the shore. The bodies of Mrs. M'Cullough and Pat. Deegan have been found but Mrs. Kelly, the second woman, Denis M'Lea, the passenger, and another individual are still missing.*

The Aran Islands drownings

On 1st May 1818, two lighthouses were established by the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin (the fore-runner of the Commissioner of Irish Lights) – one was situated high on a hill on the island of Cape Clear on the south-west coast of Ireland and the other was located on the highest point of Inis Mór, the largest of the Aran Islands in Galway Bay. Both were circular stone towers and both proved, ultimately, to have been built at too high an altitude, their respective beams often being obscured by low cloud, fog or mist.

In 1840, the two lightkeepers at Inis Mór were Messrs. Richard Harding and D. Cullen, principal and assistant respectively. Unfortunately, the remaining letters of Mr. Cullen's first name are unknown.

On Monday 17th August that year, the two men, accompanied by Mr. Harding's wife, who didn't even merit an initial, travelled to the mainland to stock up on provisions. The boat landed at Costelloe Bay, at the coastguard station, where there was a small pier and where the coast road to Galway began.

Reports of the time state that the journey from Costelloe Bay was not the smoothest and not for the faint-hearted. The keepers and Mrs. Harding were to do the journey twice in the space of a few hours.

The small pier at Costelloe Bay still exists today, along with the ruins of the coastguard station

After several hours in Galway, and doubtless loaded down with their purchases, they returned along the coast road by horse and cart back to the small pier at the mouth of Costelloe Bay. Here, they were joined by another passenger, Bryan Dirrane, for the boat trip back to the island.

There was a suggestion by the Master of the Coastguards in his report to the lighthouse authorities that Mr. Cullen had not travelled to Galway with the Hardings but had merely joined them at Costelloe Bay for the return. Whereas this is possible, there would have been no need for this. The tender for the boat would have included all loading.

The boat they took back was *The Red Gauntlet*, owned by Patrick O'Flaherty Esq., Justice of the Peace. Not only was Patrick a J.P. but he was also the island's middleman and unofficial King of the Island, meting out justice from his home in Cill Muirbhigh (Kilmurvey) on the north-western end of the island. He was an extremely wealthy and powerful man for a Catholic and reportedly well-loved by the islanders though, of course, it would probably depend on whom you were talking to.

It is possible that the *Red Gauntlet* was a Galway hooker, a utilitarian boat that was a common sight in Galway Bay in the nineteenth century. Not only were they used to ferry passengers but they also transported turf to the Aran Islands and county Clare. It is probable that the crew and passengers also shared the boat with a consignment of peat or turf. The one drawback of the hooker was that it was 'prone to being swamped and sinking in a short time in the absence of a cabin and high freeboard.'

The lighthouse, built at the highest point of Inis Mór, would have been clearly visible to the boat's occupants as they set off from Costelloe Bay.

The boat left the pier at approximately four o'clock in the afternoon. On board, apart from Mr. and Mrs. Harding, Mr. Cullen and Brian Dirrane, there was a crew of three, James Burke, the master, Peter Mannion, the boatman and a boy named Bartholomew King. It is reasonable to suppose that these last four people were locals as their first names were reported in the papers.

One early report suggested that the Harding's two daughters had also been on board but there is no mention of them in subsequent reports.

All went well until they were two-thirds of the way across, within a few miles of the harbour, possibly of Kilmurvy but probably of Kilronan. Apparently, a sudden squall of wind caught the boat, catching Burke and Mannion by surprise. They rushed to shorten the sail but it was too late and the boat capsized, pitching the seven occupants into Galway Bay. They were all drowned in what was labelled 'a

melancholy occurrence.' It seems to have been a part of a Victorian journalist's training to label every death by drowning as 'melancholy.'

The accident, it was reported, occurred between Manister (which is near Kilronan) and 'the point leading to the roadstead of Arran' (which could be just about anywhere on the island.) Chief Officer of the Coastguard Madden described the location as being a mile from the island. It has been reported anecdotally through the generations of Hardings that the Harding children were watching from the lighthouse and saw the accident happen.

The now disused Inis Mór (Dun Ogil) Lighthouse

On Monday 7th September, the *Dublin Morning Journal*, citing the *Connaught Register*, reported that '*none of the bodies of the seven unfortunate sufferers who perished on their way to the island of Arran* (sic) *about a fortnight since, have not as yet been found* (doubtless the double negative was caused by melancholia), *although several boats have been for some days unsuccessfully employed in searching for them. The vacancies created by the deaths of the two lightkeepers of Arran have been filled up.'*

In fact, on the 20th August, three days after the accident, a keeper and a temporary assistant left Dublin to take up positions at the lighthouse. Until they arrived, the lighthouse was operated by Mrs. Cullen and Elizabeth Harding, the seventeen-year-old daughter of the drowned couple. The men from the coastguard had taken charge of the lighthouse but left the operation of the light to the two women.

In addition to Elizabeth, the Harding children comprised Henry (10), Frances (7), Maryanne (3) and Jane (15 months). Presumably these were all turfed out when the new men arrived.

A letter from George Halpin (jnr) on 27th August regarding the two keepers also mentions the unfortunate accidental death of Assistant Keeper Andrew Butler at the Old Head of Kinsale lighthouse on the 22nd of the month. He continues: "*Those three keepers deceased were men of excellent character; in fact, the two assistant keepers* (Cullen and Butler) *had been selected from the Tradesmen of the Corporation for their unvarying sobriety and industry and all have left families to suffer from their loss."*

Elizabeth Harding, being too old for a gratuity, received a £20 donation from the Commissioners, with the other four children receiving a pension of £3 per annum until such time as they reached sixteen.

A report from Irish Lights in 1859 lists one Elizabeth Cullen as receiving a pension of £6 per year for the loss of her *"Husband, D. Cullen, Drowned at Arran Island."* The pension had commenced on 17th September 1840. An 1844 report also lists their child, Michael Cullen, who had been just shy of one year old at the time of the tragedy.

Interestingly, the Ballast Board's 1844 Pensions report lists one Catherine Dirrane, widow, and her six young children as receiving monies from the Board. Given the unusual name, it is entirely possible that Catherine was the wife of the passenger, Bryan Dirrane, who joined the boat at Costelloe Bay. It is unlikely that he was a keeper, as he was not mentioned in Halpin's letter, but he must have performed some service for the Ballast Board for his family to receive pensions.

A clue to this may lie in the 1821 Census for Inis Mór, which miraculously survives. In the house of Head Lightkeeper Lt. Robert Wilson, his wife and three children, there also lived two 'house servants,' Bryan Dirrane (18) and Mary Finnegan (17.) Maybe Bryan was some sort of assistant, even though there was an 'under lightkeeper' next door in Richard Kelly.

Temporary keeper Elizabeth Harding crossed the Atlantic and reared a family. She died in Toronto aged 75 years. Her sister Frances settled in Bay City Michigan, married and had children. It appears that their father had a brother who had emigrated and he may well have facilitated a new life for the girls and possibly others in the family.

The lighthouse was eventually replaced in 1857 by two lighthouses at either end of the Aran Islands chain, Eeragh and Inis Oírr. There have been tentative moves afoot in the last few years to restore and conserve the old site, which is in remarkably good condition, considering it has lain dormant in this elevated position for the past 160 years. It went on sale in 2021 for over half a million euro.

These days, the Aran Island ferry service, with its 290-passenger capacity, bar service and air-conditioned cabin does the trip from Rossaveal to Inis Mór in 40 minutes and the possibility of a sudden squall capsizing the boat is practically nil.

Sources:

Copy of letter from the Commissioner of Irish Lights to Rev. E.P. Leckie 15th July 1959, and other information, courtesy John Harding Leckie, (Harding descendant)
The Southern Reporter, 1st September 1840 and others
The Dublin Morning Journal 7th September 1840
Genealogical research by Harding descendant Janet Harper Long

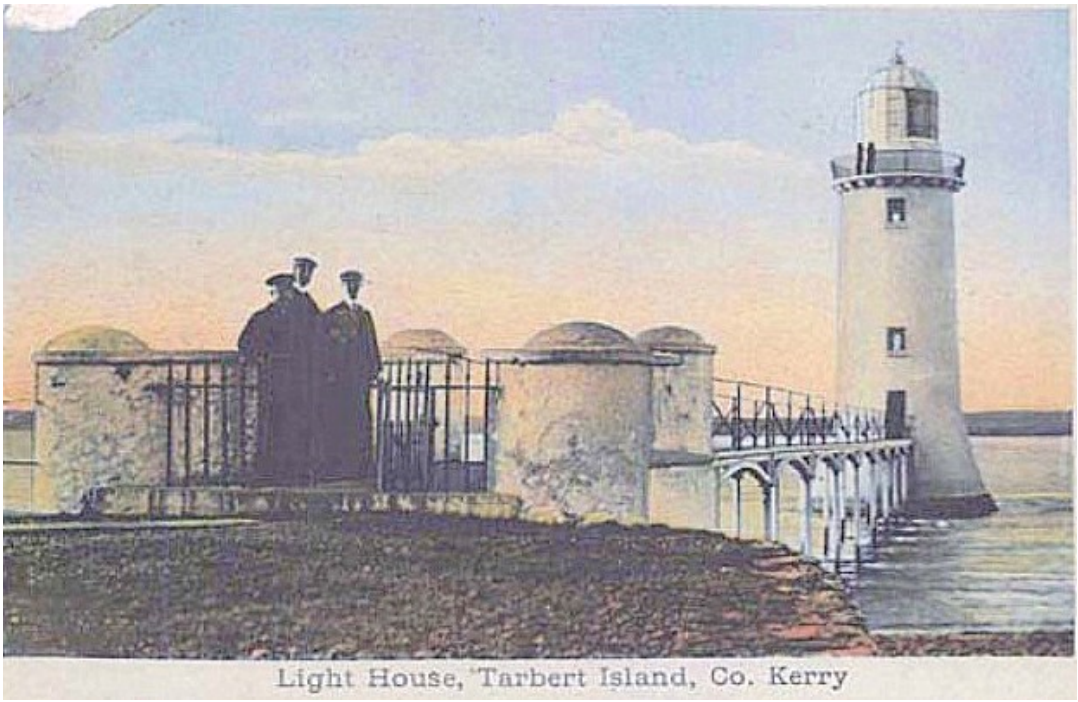
“A poor man,” Tarbert

From the Kerry Evening Post, Saturday 29th August 1840: -

On Tuesday last, a poor man was conveying a large quantity of heavy metal for constructing the bridge between the Light-House and Tarbert Island, when the boat was upset and one of the pieces of the metal fell upon the poor man’s breast, which carried him to the bottom and he was drowned.

Tarbert lighthouse on the south shore of the Shannon estuary is built on a rock off Tarbert Island and was established on 31st March 1834. It came with a solid masonry bridge 200 feet long bridge connecting the lighthouse to the island. This, it was felt, would mean there would be no need for the keepers to row the short but dangerous distance to and from their shore dwelling to attend the light.

Unfortunately, the great storm of January 1839, which caused widespread damage around the country, swept away the bridge and a new one had to be constructed. This was an elegant cast-iron footbridge, five feet six inches wide, and it was for this bridge that the poor man – so poor that the reporter didn’t go to the trouble of finding out his name – was conveying the materials.



Old postcard of the bridge and lighthouse at Tarbert (Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of Muckross House, Muckross House Research Library)

The Redmond children, Skellig Michael

The Redmonds are one of those families whose names can be found in every generation whenever Irish lighthouses are mentioned. In fact, there are so many Redmonds that it is practically impossible to untangle all the branches of their family tree and indeed, there may be more than one tree in the mass of foliage on display.

What is fairly certain is that, at least in the early nineteenth century, there were two brothers called Hugh and Joshua Redmond, who both became lighthouse keepers. They appear to have been born around 1800 and both served on Skellig Michael, though probably at different times. And it would appear that each lost a child on the island.

The old upper lighthouse on Skellig Michael, long abandoned by the time of this early twentieth century photograph. (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

The information from recent publications is quite vague. There is mention of a lightkeeper called Redmond who lost a son and a nephew there. This sometimes comes down as two children and a nephew. Most accounts fail to mention that there were two Redmond lightkeepers and that each lost one son.

Of Hugh Redmond, we know very little. There is little anecdotal evidence from this early period that can be backed up by documented fact, so the stories may be only partly accurate or total fabrications. Hugh, allegedly a Wexford man, was supposed to have been one of the first keepers on Skellig Michael and is reported to have lost a son 'over the cliffs.'

It is said that one of his daughters was one half of the 'Maidens Lovers' story. This tale, which occurred in 1839, concerns the North and South Maidens lighthouses off the Antrim coast.

The story – which may have been embellished over the years – states that Thomas McKenna was the assistant keeper at the North Maidens light and Hugh Redmond's daughter (Mary Anne) lived at the South Maidens and they were sweet on each other, to use a phrase long disappeared. Thomas built a boat to row over and visit his sweetheart but his father, the principal keeper, frowned upon the alliance and smashed the boat.

Undaunted, the pair swapped love letters with the help of a friendly carrier pigeon. They also exchanged correspondence via semaphore, '*making love telescopically*,' as one newspaper reported in 1868.

The last of these told the daughter to be ready at the landing pier at midnight. Thomas then rowed another boat – *"The Conquering Hero"* - over, got the girl, eloped to Carrickfergus on the mainland, married and lived happily ever after. Well, not completely happily because, on returning to his post, young Thomas and Mary Anne found that his father still had a snot on him over the affair and they were obliged to seek a transfer.

But back to Skellig Michael and Joshua who, unlike his brother, was supposed to be a Dublin man. This might indicate that their father was engaged in one of the trades that involved moving around the coast, such as lightkeeping or coastguarding.

The 1851 Valuation Report for the Great Skellig lists Edward Nolan (PK) and John Kelly as being the keepers of the Lower Light and Joshua Redmond (PK) and James Butler at the Upper Light. Three of the quartet had been on the rock since 1838, with James being the blow-in with only six years of Skellig service under his belt. It was not long after this that the length of service at any of the main stations was recommended to last roughly three years.

An article in *The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle - a Journal of Papers Connected with Maritime Affairs (1856)* details a visit to Skellig Michael and adds the following snippet –

The names of the lower lightkeepers are Nolan and Moore and, of the upper, Gregory and Redmond; the last-mentioned has been seventeen years on the rock without visiting the mainland, and says he has no desire whatever to do so.

Let us go back to 1851 then and a visit to the island by a tourist, one John Windele, of Blair's Castle, Cork, who wrote a slightly confused account of the monastery and his interaction with the keepers on the island. Peter Harbison, in his commentary on the account in 1976, highlights several inconsistencies in Windele's account, mostly regarding the places visited at the oratory.

One of his other confusions regards the name of the principal keeper at the Upper Light, who Windele calls Rooney. The Valuation Report of the same year shows no Rooney and Joshua Redmond as the PK of the Upper Light, so we may assume Rooney is in fact Redmond.

Windele goes on to describe him as a violin maker and a rough and ready oil painter, adding

"*His life whilst here has not been without unpleasant events, having lost a son by being 'clifted,' that is, falling down a cliff. The fatal spot he showed us. It is in the Blue Cove. The narrow roadway winds round it towards the upper lighthouse and, having the security of a stout parapet wall, we were able to inspect a cliff-guarded bay, bristling with rocks below, over which the waves chafed as they came in from countless miles of ocean. A foot of the unfortunate young man was all that was ever found."*

The foot referred to, we must assume, is the body part, as to take it as meaning twelve inches of the poor lad would be even more grisly.

One suspects that Windele took insufficient notes on his short visit to Skellig Michael and had to rely on memory when writing up his account. The cove between the two lighthouses is called Seal Cove and is probably where the Redmond lad fell. The Blue Cove has no roadway or parapet overlooking it and is on the north side of the island.

Joshua's unfortunate son may have been called George. Joshua and his wife Margaret had a son called George when they were stationed on Inis Mór on the Aran Islands in 1834, after which he disappears. But, with the paucity of records for that period, the victim could easily have been another son.

Joshua was finally dragged kicking and screaming off Skellig Michael between 1856 and 1860. He was given a handy little number at Kilcredaun lighthouse on the Shannon estuary and later retired to Kilrush, where he died in 1873.

The lower light on Skellig Michael. Seal Cove is to the right.

Sources:
Genealogical research by Redmond descendant Heather Walker
Kerry Evening Post 23rd September 1854
John Windele's Visit to Skellig Michael in 1851 by Peter Harbison, *The Journal of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society No.9 (1976)*
The Nautical Magazine and Naval Chronicle - a Journal of Papers Connected with Maritime Affairs (1856)

Patrick Gallagher, Whitecastle

The problem with researching the maritime history of Lough Foyle is the lack of an archive. When the Harbour Commissioners moved from Derry to Lisahally, it transpired that a lot of the old records were lost, probably forever. In addition to this, being basically a Trust Port, a lot of the borough records from there, and indeed all over the province, were sent to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland who, at the time, was very much the poor relation of the Civil Service, thoroughly underfunded and under-resourced. Consequently, many records still lie in bulk in the PRONI vaults, uncatalogued and unarchived.

It is therefore with little surprise that the only record I could find of the drowning of 12-year-old Patrick Gallagher was a small snippet in the *Derry Journal* of 7th January 1846 under the inevitable headline '*Melancholy Occurrence*.'

Model of Whitecastle pile light by Ken Doherty, built from a 1927 photograph, currently on display at the Inishowen Maritime Museum in Greencastle. The pile light was erected in 1848, two years after Patrick Gallagher's death

What was a surprise was that this small snippet contains a rare reference to this short-lived lightship (or light-boat, as it is referenced in the article) stationed in Lough Foyle. Together with another 'large lightship' at Crumman Point, it was established in January 1847 and discarded the following year when the pile light was built. Another lightship served in Rosses' Bay downriver from the city of Derry for several years in the 1860s.

The main channel down the vast expanse of Lough Foyle runs along the coastline on the Donegal side of the Lough. In 1848, the Derry Harbour Board began a programme of lighting this channel and pile lights were erected at regular intervals from the small village of Redcastle down to Culmore and the mouth of the River Foyle.

Prior to this, darkness had reigned during night-time hours, meaning ships heading for Derry would have to weigh anchor to wait for daylight and the tide to progress. The article mentions that the light-boat was placed at the Whitecastle buoy, so it seems there were buoys marking the channel. It also suggests that the Whitecastle pile light was erected roughly on the spot of the light-boat two years after the events described in the article, which I quote in full.

As Patrick and George Gallagher of Rosskey (sons of the person who has charge of the light-boat stationed in Lough Foyle at Whitecastle buoy) were proceeding, on Thursday last, to the light-boat and were dropping down with the ebb tide, their small boat came against the light-boat and the bow was split and the boat began to fill with water.

Patrick got hold of a rope attached to the light-boat, but the small boat was leaving him before he could get on board, and his brother George got hold of him by the foot, and in this position both remained for a short time.

The current of the ebb tide, however, being strong, forced them to let go their holds and Patrick fell into the water, and George into their own small boat, which was sinking. Patrick, who was a young lad of about twelve years of age, being exhausted previously, soon met a watery grave. The other brother, George, must have perished also but for the assistance of a boat who saw their extremity and came in time to his relief.

The dead body of Patrick was found in a few hours by the fishermen of that part of Lough Foyle who dredged for it. The deceased was of very amiable character and his untimely death has cast a gloom among all persons in that neighbourhood.

Purpose-built lifeboats cost a lot of money and, around the Irish coast, were the preserve of Trinity House and the Ballast Board, who had responsibility for sea lights. Harbour lights were operated by local authorities, who would use a converted shipping smack to shine a light where lighthouses or beacons were impractical, or to temporarily mark a wreck where a boat had sunk and was causing danger to shipping. These makeshift light vessels operated, at one time or another, at Galway, Rosses Bay in Derry, Belfast, pre-Poolbeg in Dublin and pre-Spit lighthouse in Cobh.

Sources:
Derry Journal 7th January 1846

William Capel, Kingstown West

The west pier at Dun Laoghaire is very much the poorer brother to the east pier. Whereas the east pier is generally thronged with walkers and boasts a large lighthouse inside a barrack compound, boat tours, an ice-cream shop and even an anemometer, the smaller lighthouse at the end of the west pier stands alone, circumnavigated only by the occasional jogger or dog-walker. With traces of grass struggling through the gaps in the beautiful stonework, there is an almost rural feel about the west pier.

Kingstown *by Richard Bridges Beechey (1870) The east pier lighthouse is seen on the left, the west pier on the right*

The tiny village of Dunleary had little going for it at the end of the eighteenth century, except maybe the problems of Dublin and Howth. The latter both suffered from drifting sandbanks and the calls for a decent harbour quickly gained momentum. The first stone of the new harbour in Kingstown was laid in 1817 and the east pier started to move out from the shore, accompanied by a temporary movable light at its extremity. In time, it was realised that a west pier would also be desirable and it too became bookended by a temporary wooden lighthouse. By this time, the village's name had changed to Kingstown after a visit by George IV in 1820, which was just the sort of grovelling that royalty seemed to go in for.

And so, the two piers slowly closed together in a pincer movement. The east pier lighthouse was lit for the first time in October 1847 and the temporary light removed.

By 1849, the west pier was nearing completion but the temporary lighthouse was still operational. According to a Notice to Mariners in 1847, it was a temporary timber shed that showed a fixed red light from sunset to sunrise. The keeper of this light was one William Capel.

The scant knowledge that we have of William consists mainly of the two adjectives 'old' and 'feeble.' We also know that he was unfortunate enough to be caught at the temporary shed during a violent storm in October 1849.

The storm had raged for three days and nights and the east coast of England was particularly hard hit with many vessels sunk and lives lost. In the harbour at Kingstown, the *Friendship,* from Halifax, Nova Scotia, with her cargo of coal, was driven onto the shore near the old harbour and became a total wreck.

There are three main reports of William's death, all copied verbatim in newspapers in Ireland and England. One simply states that "*Wm. Capel, the keeper of the wooden lighthouse on the west pier was drowned in trying to effect his escape."*

The second reports that *"The keeper of the lighthouse on the western pier at Kingstown was drowned on Sunday night by the sea washing over the wall. He was very feeble."*

The third elaborates oh, so slightly. *"He was a feeble old man and it is supposed that in trying to escape from the lighthouse, he was struck by a sea, stunned and drowned in the pool of water which remained around him."*

It was left to the *Evening Packet* on Tuesday 9th October to put the death into some kind of context. *"From the appearance of Saturday, the clear, pellucid atmosphere indicated bad weather at hand and on Saturday night, at about ten o'clock, it commenced to blow from the E.S.E. and, at midnight, east. From daylight on Sunday, until late in the evening, it blew with great force and the sea was raised to a corresponding violence…. The sea made right over both pier heads and it was momentarily expected that the wooden lighthouse on the west pier would have been carried away, no person supposing the poor invalid lightkeeper remained in such a perilous habitation. It appears he did not attempt to escape from it until last night when the sea had partially subsided but his great feebleness is supposed to have prevented his escape, for he was found drowned on the road close to the lighthouse. His name is William Capel."*

And that is the story of William Capel. Whenever one stands at the end of the east pier and looks across the harbour mouth to the west pier, it is difficult not to think of that poor, scared old man stuck in a wooden box for two whole days as the storm raged around him, fearing he might be swept into the harbour at any moment.

And, on leaving one wooden box, the irony was that he very quickly found another one.

Sources:
The Evening Packet 9th October 1849 and others
Athlone Sentinel 17th October 1849 and others
The Construction of Dun Laoghaire Harbour by the Dun Laoghaire Harbour Company

Philip and Edward Doherty, Inishtrahull

From the Coleraine Chronicle, Saturday 22nd June 1850: -

Melancholy case of Drowning – On Saturday morning last, as Philip Doherty and Edward Doherty of Ballygorman, near Malin Well, were proceeding, in a boat, to the island of Instrahull, (sic) *and when about to enter the port, the boat was struck by a heavy sea and upset when, melancholy to relate, both men were thrown into the water and perished. They were the boatmen appointed for conveying, from the mainland to the lighthouse, the necessary supplies of provisions for the keeper, and oil for the lights, and had been in comfortable circumstances and said to have been experienced boatmen of strong constitution and athletic frames. Their untimely fate has left eleven children fatherless, Philip having left six and Edward five, besides their wives, bereft of their natural protectors.*

The outermost of the Garvan Islands that lie between Malin and Inishtrahull are known as the Doherty Rocks, though a link to Philip and Edward has not been established.

The remains of the old lighthouse on Inishtrahull today with the modern (1958) light in the distance. The island is the most northerly part of Ireland (excluding Rockall) and was inhabited by a hard-working, if somewhat lawless, population until the 1920s. (Image courtesy of the John McCarron)

Wright, Carlingford Lough

It seems to be a recurring theme at Irish lighthouses, particularly in the mid-nineteenth century that the transportation to and from offshore lights was the factor most likely to incur loss of life. Slyne Head in 1836 and again in 1852, the Aran Islands in 1840 and the Calf Rock in 1869 all visited terrible loss of life on local communities when boats overturned. The case of young Master or Miss Wright in Carlingford Lough engendered only one drowning yet the fact that it was a child and we never find out his or her sex, never mind name, makes it all the more poignant.

The first lighthouse marking the entrance to Carlingford Lough was placed in 1803 on the mainland on the northern headland at a place called Cranfield Point. Cottages were built next to it but it was soon realised that the light was poorly positioned. A new lighthouse was built in the middle of the entrance to the lough on a barely submerged rock. This was the Haulbowline light, first exhibited on 1st September 1824 and still proudly standing nearly 200 years later. The old Cranfield Point lighthouse was abandoned and eventually fell to coastal erosion in the 1860s, but the keepers' cottages continued to be used by the keepers and their families while off duty.

It was from one of these cottages that Mr. Wright, a lightkeeper at Haulbowline lighthouse, his wife and three children set forth on Thursday July 17th 1851 to visit the town of Carlingford on the opposite, southern side of the lough. It may well have been a market day or the family may have simply been going on an outing. Rather than travelling around the full extent of the lough as far as Newry and then back along the county Louth shore, they hired a boatman named Rogers to bring them across the lough. He was probably the boatman who had the tender for the lighthouse. Their journey would have taken them very close to the Haulbowline lighthouse, where Mr. Wright was employed.

Location of Haulbowline. The white triangle marks the Cranfield Point dwellings (courtesy of Mapcarta)

The day passed and, in the afternoon, it was time for the return journey. The party set off from Carlingford but it seems they had not gone a mile when a sudden squall, to which the lough is particularly partial, caught the sail aback and immediately overturned the boat. The *Newry Examiner and Louth Advertiser* ascribes the accident, somewhat unfairly, perhaps "*to some mismanagement on the part of those who had charge of her,*" presumably the hapless Mr. Rogers.

The lightkeepers' cottages at Cranfield Point from where the Wrights set out on their fatal trip (picture taken in 2014.) Note the tall black chimney pots typical of lighthouse dwellings in the 1800s.

With the entire party in the water, Mr. Wright managed to grab two of his children and placed them on the keel of the upturned boat. The third child sadly drowned.

Mrs. Wright and the boatman also clung to the boat but the former was in a bad way and not very strong. Fortunately for her and the others, the scene was witnessed from the shore and the coastguard immediately set out, headed by their exotically named commander, Lieutenant Servantes, and succeeded in rescuing the survivors. They were taken back to John Humphrey's Hotel in Carlingford where Mrs. Wright was said to be *"lying in a dangerous state."* However, in the absence of any further reports on her condition, it is hoped that she made a full recovery.

The body of *"the child"* was evidently recovered, for an inquest was held the following day, the newspaper report not giving away the name, age or gender of the recently departed. The coroner's court came to its verdict "*after a patient*

investigation as to the facts, and as to whether there had been neglect or drunkenness on the occasion in question" of accidental drowning, a salient statement that suggests that it may well have been market day in Carlingford.

The coroner, J. Byrne Esq, and the jury both recommended to the Humane Society that the Carlingford coastguards should be recognised for their exertions, not only in this case but for having saved the lives of eleven individuals in the past six weeks.

They also warmly applauded the actions of the young masters Rutherford and of their boatman on this melancholy occasion. Whatever they did.

The majestic Haulbowline lighthouse was painted white until 1946 when it reverted to its natural stone colour. Note the tide light half way up the left hand side of the tower.

Sources:
The Newry Examiner 19th July 1851
The Newry Telegraph 22nd July 1851
The Belfast Mercury 24th July 1851

Slyne Head drownings

Between the years 1832 and 1838, at least eleven people were killed at Slyne Head off the far west point of south county Galway *(see page 24).* Nine or more of these fell victim to the freak waves for which this coast is notorious. The two lighthouses were established in 1836 and the tender for taking men and provisions from Slackport on the mainland to the island of Illaunamid was, for well over a century, in the hands of the King family.

Unfortunately, the early loss of life was not the end of the tragedies for history repeated itself in 1852 with another accident entailing the loss of life of seven poor souls.

The disused (foreground) and current lighthouses at Slyne Head
(Photograph courtesy Dermot Breen)

The tragedy began innocently enough with the principal lightkeeper at Slyne Head, a Mr. Thomas Connor (also referred to in newspaper reports as O'Connor), being informed by his employers, the Ballast Board, that he was being transferred to Kilcredaun lighthouse on the Shannon estuary. Kilcredaun is a mainland lighthouse and there would be less stress for Thomas' wife, Elizabeth, after the worry of keeping her five young children safe on the tiny storm-ravaged island of Illaunamid.

Thomas, therefore, went ashore, as like as not with the relief boat, to make the necessary arrangements for the trip down to county Clare, which would have been a journey and a half, most likely taking several days.

By the time that Thomas Connor had done what he had to, the weather had disimproved greatly. According to local folklore, a storm had whipped up but the head lightkeeper insisted that he should be brought back to the island immediately. The owner of the boat, a man named Thomas King, knew that attempting such a trip would be sheer folly and would doubtless end in disaster. And so, he refused to put

out. Enraged, the lightkeeper accused him of cowardice, an accusation that stung the boatman so much that he immediately began to assemble a crew, even though he knew that it was complete madness.

At a distance of 170 years, there is no way of gauging the veracity of this tale. On the one hand, it is hard to imagine an experienced lightkeeper would have so little respect for the power of the sea. On the other hand, the fact remains that the party did set out on a storm-riven day.

The King family and the lighthouses at Slyne Head share a very long history. The family held the contract for lighthouse relief and supplies for over 130 years until the helicopter took over in 1969. It was a temporary keeper named King who jointly filed complaints against his two bosses in 1895 for drunkenness and desertion of their posts.

Aside from himself, Thomas King assembled five men to carry the impatient lightkeeper over to his island. They were Festus 'Festy' King, his brother; John King, his nephew (although he might possibly have been Thomas's fourteen-year-old son); Michael Conry or Conroy (a man called Conroy was one of the victims of the 1836 drownings); Festus D'Arcy, father of two; and Martin Joice, or Joyce, father of one.

So, on 22nd October 1852, the seven men travelled by donkey down to Slackport where the boats were moored, passing through 'wretched villages' on the way, as one travelogue called them. One might guess, as the storm raged around them, that feelings of apprehension and resentment ran high and that the chances of a sing-song were negligible.

The road to Slackport today, which became known as the M1 when paved in the 20th century. (Photograph © Jonathan Wilkins cc-by-sa 2.0)

The simple end to the story is that the seven men disappeared forever.

When they failed to return, apprehension on the mainland grew. Boats were launched to go to the island in the hope that the men might be marooned there but they only got halfway and were obliged to turn back. This might be the reason why newspaper reports presumed that the boat got as far as Duck Island, roughly halfway between the mainland and Illaunamid before overturning. Local lore suggests they were driven onto a reef known as The Pool.

Boats were launched again on Sunday 24th October at great risk to those concerned but the storm and the massive breakers pushed them back.

On the island, Elizabeth Connor must have been hoping against hope that her husband was merely stranded on the mainland and would come over as soon as the

storm abated. On the mainland, part of the boat and an oar were found, together with an oil can floating on the sea and the worst was assumed. The best they could hope for was that the boat had reached the lighthouse and had been swamped on the way back. At least the death toll would be six instead of seven.

Eventually, a boat reached the lighthouse and Elizabeth Connor discovered she was a widow with a family of five young children to bring up. The second part of the boat eventually washed up ten miles from where the first half had been found.

Initial newspaper reports put the death toll at nine, naming the six members of the crew and the lightkeeper and stating that the names of the remaining members of the crew were not yet available.

There are two stories with a supernatural bias that gained a foothold in the locality in the aftermath of the drowning.

The first concerned two of the keepers on Illaunamid who both declared that, on the evening that the boat perished, they had seen Thomas O'Connor walking up from the landing place on the east side of the island and enter the marital home.

The second was the story of the brother of one of the crew. He was lying awake in bed on the night of the tragedy when his brother came into the room. The brother kept a small box in the bedroom in which he kept some money. The money was primarily used for games of cards at night. This night, the brother came into the room and went to the box. After a minute or two, he seemingly had got what he wanted and walked out of the room again. It was only the following day that the lad realised that he must have seen the ghost of his brother.

The dependants of the seven men were brought down to earth with a bump when the Ballast Board determined the compensation due to them.

To Elizabeth Connor, widow of Thomas, £6 per annum, with £3 per annum each to their children, Mary (10), Arthur (8), Thomas (5), Jane (3) and William (8 months) while they were still children.

To Monica King (nee Sloper), widow of head boatman Thomas King, £6 per annum with £3 per annum to her children, Ann (11), Mary (8), Thomas (6), Martin (4) and Bridget (2).

To Mary Joyce, widow of boatman Martin Joyce £6 per annum with £3 per annum for their daughter, Barbara.

To Anne (7) and Martin Darcy (5), children of boatman Festus Darcy, £3 per annum.

The above figures were taken from an Irish Lights pension report of 1859. Presumably the widow of Festus Darcy had died or remarried in the seven years since the accident. Also, Anne Darcy received only half her allowance in 1857 and nothing in 1858, indicating that she died in the former year.

Sources:
Galway Vindicator 27th October 1852
Freeman's Journal 29th October 1852
Belfast Newsletter 1st November 1852
Bell's New Weekly Messenger 7th November 1852
Irish Independent 10th January 1938

M'Donough and two fishermen, Eeragh

From the Dublin Evening Mail, 25th August 1854: -

Melancholy Death by Drowning – On Monday last, a canoe containing four men put off from the Island of Arran, for one of the islands of the group known as the Branaghs, about two miles distant. On this island, called Rock Island (also called Eeragh*), a lighthouse is in course of being erected, but the landing on the island is so inaccessible that the few residents thereon are obliged to provide themselves with at least six months store of provisions.*

It would appear that in the course of the works in progress for the building of the lighthouse, the services of a blacksmith were required, and accordingly, about midday on Monday, a smith, whose name, we heard, was M'Donough, embarked in a canoe at Arran, which was pulled by two fine hardy muscular fishermen. The only other passenger in the boat was a man advanced in years and having little or no physical strength or energy, who was going to see some of his family or friends on the island. The little canoe was pulled safely and rapidly across the billows until it neared the shore of Rock Island; but there the surf beat so high and heavily towards the landing-place, that after several efforts to reach the shore, the fragile bark was upset and, melancholy to relate, the two boatmen and the blacksmith met a watery grave, and had their lifeless corpses dashed against the rocks in presence of several spectators who could not render the slightest assistance.

But the most singular part of this lamentable occurrence remains to be told. The old and feeble man who, of course, was dashed into the waves with the others, on the canoe being capsized, managed, by some miraculous struggle, to hold onto it as it lay tossing about amid the surf; and, the tide being setting inwards, by the exertion of those on shore, he was rescued from the unhappy fate which his poor fellow voyagers were consigned to. – Galway Packet

On 17th December 1853, eight months previously, the *Galway Packet* ran the story of how the Inspector of Lighthouses, George Halpin, and Mr. Crowe of Dublin, the contractor, had taken a canoe across to the island to inspect the works. However, approaching the rockbound island, the canoe was upset in the surf and the two men would surely have drowned, were it not for the prompt assistance of the workmen, who succeeded in rescuing them at the imminent risk of their own lives.

The light was due to have been exhibited on 1st November 1857 but, due to adverse weather conditions, this was delayed to 1st December. Initially, the tower was white with two red bands but this was altered to white with two black bands in 1932. As well as Eeragh and Rock Island, the station was also called North Aran and one imagines that the lightkeepers occasionally called it other names too.

Joseph Kerr, Holywood Bank lighthouse

Painting of the Holywood Bank lighthouse, artist unknown, currently in the Belfast Harbour Board office. Dated to 1860.

One of the great names in Irish (and indeed global) lighthouse history is Alexander Mitchell, the blind, Belfast engineer (born in South William Street in Dublin but the family moved to Belfast when young). Inspired by how easily a corkscrew went into a cork but could not be pulled out straight, he transferred the principal to the problem of building edifices on mud. The story goes that, in the 1830s, with his 19-year-old son, John, he rowed out into Belfast Lough with a long pole attached to a metal screw. This he screwed into the mud, leaving the top of the pole exposed. He came back the following day to find the pole still *in situ* and the screwpile lighthouse was born.

It was doubtless gratifying to him that his adopted city was one of the first to request one of his pile lights. It was erected in 1844 on the edge of a large and dangerous bank of sand off Holywood, county Down. The lighthouse also doubled as a pilot station and contained fifteen sleeping berths, as well as separate apartments for both the captain of the pilots and his assistant. The captain of the pilots was also in charge of the light.

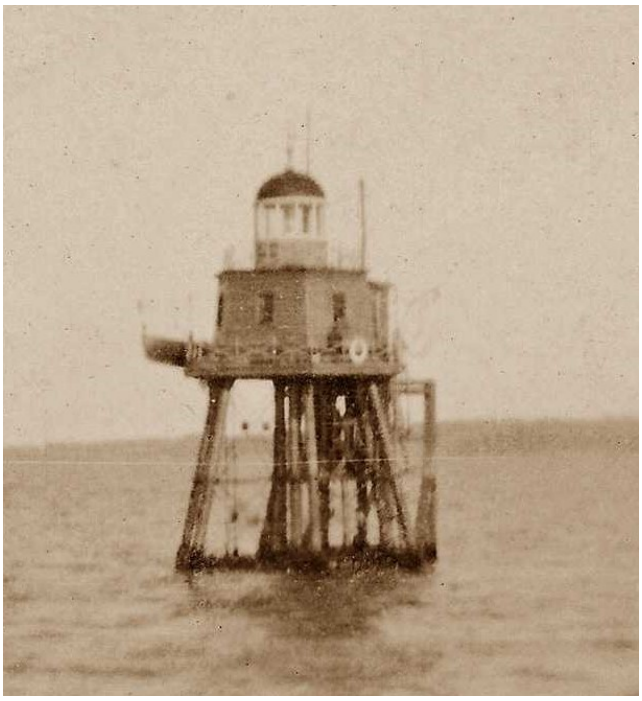
We do not know when Joseph Kerr became the lightkeeper of the Holywood Bank light. Newspaper reports in the early 1850s talk generally of regatta races being held "*to Kerr's lighthouse and back,*" which suggests he was certainly well-known in the area by this time. A Joseph Kerr, born in Belfast in 1821, received his Master's Certificate in 1851 for having served seven years in the coasting trade as a boy, mate and master. It was probably the same man.

Joseph Kerr was married and had two small children. His wife used to mind the red light at the bottom of the Victoria Channel. When morning came, Kerr was in the habit of dowsing his own light and taking the boat to his wife's lighthouse.

At 7 o'clock on Monday morning 14th May 1855, he was doing just this when, descending the ladder on the piles, he fell into the water and was carried away. What made this all the worse was that the accident was witnessed by the keeper's six-year-old daughter. As the strong current took him away, his daughter attempted to push the boat out to him but was unable to do so. Raising the alarm, the pilots immediately set about scouring the area but were unable to find him. At last, around two o'clock in the afternoon, the Harbour Commissioners' pilot boat succeeded in locating the body not far from the lighthouse.

The obligatory inquest was held at the General Hospital in Belfast and came to the unsurprising conclusion that Joseph Kerr had been accidentally drowned.

At the next meeting of the Belfast Harbour Board, it was graciously agreed that they should permit Mrs. Kerr to continue to mind her light as she had done during her husband's lifetime, as otherwise the family would be unprovided for.



The Holywood Bank lighthouse lasted until 12th March 1889 when it was knocked for six by the Earl of Ulster *paddle steamer.*

Seven weeks later, the Harbour Board engineer had the sad duty to report that Mrs. Kerr (being a woman, her first name was immaterial) had also died. The Board empowered Messrs. Pirrie and Henderson to inquire what could be done for the two orphaned children and to appoint a successor immediately.

Sources:
The Ulsterman 16th May 1855
The Northern Whig 17th May 1855

John Doyle, Slyne Head

Of all the deaths in this book, the demise of John Doyle is probably the strangest. Certainly, it is the most mysterious. Was it murder? Was it suicide? An accident? Or simply natural causes? A good case could be made for any of the four verdicts and, unless a long-forgotten confession suddenly appears from somebody's attic, we shall never know for certain.

On 10th September 1859, John Doyle caught his first glimpse of the two lighthouses on Slyne Head. The principal lightkeeper at one of the lights, a man by the name of Edward Gregory (39) had been taken ill and John had been sent to the island as a temporary replacement. He probably believed that he wouldn't be there for very long. Little did he know …

The twin towers of Slyne Head from the mainland

On the island, meanwhile, there was already a great deal of resentment towards the newcomer, even before he clambered out of the boat and onto the tiny quay at the eastern end of the island. Anne Gregory, (40), the wife of the principal keeper, could not fathom why there was a need to send over a replacement for her husband. Sure, hadn't their son, Jacob, been doing all the work of an assistant keeper, albeit in an unofficial capacity? Edward had shown him everything he needed to know and he was well able to do the job. What on earth were the Ballast Board doing sending over some interloper when there was a ready-made replacement on the spot?

Edward and Anne had been married in 1844. We do not know where specifically but it was in the diocese of Tuam. As Anne's father, John Hinton, was also a lightkeeper, we may assume that they met when Edward and John were stationed together, maybe at Slyne Head, Inis Mór or Clare Island, all situated in that diocese.

John Hinton, we know, was at Mutton Island in the 1850s. Being the daughter of a lightkeeper, Anne would have been well-acquainted with the job involved and with the internal politics of the lighthouse service.

Edward and Anne had other children apart from Jacob. There was Oliver John (11), William Albert (5) and Robert Lever (1) and there may have been more.

So, John Doyle blithely walked across the island, doubtless in the company of one or two of the other keepers who had come to meet the boat, unaware that he was stepping into the lion's den. Or maybe he was warned by one of the keeper's to be very wary of the Gregorys.

Less than two years previously, there had been a flurry of actions in the petty court between the Gregorys on one part and Thomas Moore, lightkeeper, and an Ann Conry (almost certainly the wife of another keeper) on the other.

Edward Gregory (the registrar typed it as Edmund) charged both Thomas Moore and Ann Conry with assault.

Thomas Moore charged that Edward Gregory *did wilfully and maliciously throw complainant's clothes into where there were old barrels and nuisance* (sic)

Thomas Moore charged Edward Gregory with assault.

Ann Conry charged Edward Gregory with violent assault.

Ann Conry furthermore charged Anne Gregory with assault.

In the end, none of the complainants turned up at the court and all charges were dismissed.

John Doyle was not the recipient of much overt resentment from the Gregorys, it would appear. He was in good spirits and in good health during his short sojourn at Slyne Head. Indeed, the third evening found him in the Gregory house availing of some refreshments.

One version of the events that followed states that *she* (Anne Gregory) *is alleged to have put poison in John Doyle's tea. He, feeling ill, went out of the house to get some fresh air and, unsteady from the chronic pain caused by the action of the poison, fell into the sea and was drowned.*

Another scenario has it that *on the evening of that day, he complained of having got brandy and whiskey mixed from Mrs. Gregory (the lighthouse keeper's wife) and he also complained that his tea was tampered with and said he was a "done man" for he believed they were poisoned.*

He shortly afterwards became quite insane and asked Mrs. Byrnes for some senna and salts to relieve the pain he was in. After that, he was induced by some persuasion to go to bed; and he was not alive after that, his corpse being found on the Aughrish shore, twenty miles distant. It is supposed he got out of bed and threw himself into the sea.

The body was not found until 6th October, nearly four weeks after the lightkeeper disappeared. Aughrish pier lies just across the sound from the northern shore of Omey Island, where poor W. Rivett was washed up in 1838 (*see page 25*).

An inquest was held on the same day and immediately adjourned for the details of the tragedy to be established. At first it was assumed to be an accidental drowning but it was reported that Inspector Ireland of the local police force was unhappy with this and caused further investigation into the matter, when the last reported hours of the deceased came to light. Further adjournments took place, one of which entailed the body being sent to Dublin for analysis.

The results of the analysis were not made available until 9th January 1860, when a coroner's jury was again assembled. The medical evidence showed that John Doyle had been perfectly healthy in mind and body up until the day of his death and consequently the jury, after some consideration, returned their verdict to the coroner, George Cottingham Esq. viz. "*That the deceased, John Doyle, came by his death on the night of Tuesday 13th, or Wednesday 14th, September last, from the effects of poison administered to him on Slynehead Island* (sic)*, said poison being administered by Mrs. Anne Gregory."*

Upon the jury's verdict, Mrs. Gregory was then taken into custody on the coroner's warrant and committed to Galway Gaol.

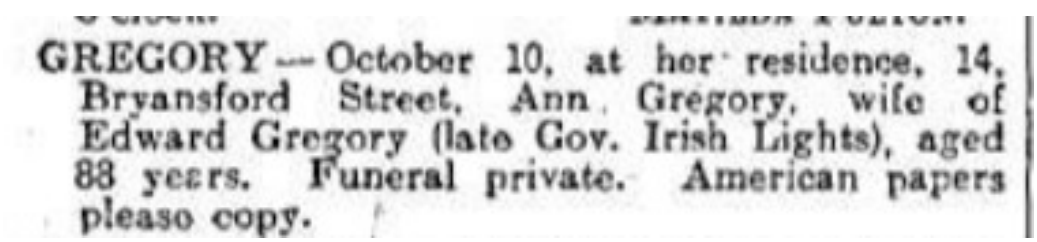
Meanwhile, the Ballast Board were unconvinced and simply referred to the death as a 'drowning.' An Inspecting Committee was sent down to Slyne Head to make enquiries and they reported back that they had had an opportunity to inquire as to the state of Gregory's family 'and *'the Committee was fully convinced that the accusation levied had been groundless and that Mrs. Gregory had suffered many months imprisonment, coupled with the fact that the Gregorys had a large young family, the Committee recommended that a land station should be selected for them.'* The Board agreed and decreed that the family should be sent to either Clare Island or Tarbert, neither of which were actually land stations!

There is no evidence that the case of Anne Gregory ever went to trial, but neither do we have a date for her release, although one of her sons, Alfred, died in 1915 aged 54 years, which puts his year of birth in the 1860 / 61 ballpark, if accurate.

The Gregorys did indeed move down to the lighthouse at Tarbert where, in 1864, Edward was successfully sued in the petty court for not paying a mason 18/- for works completed and Jacob Gregory, the aspiring lightkeeper, was done for robbing apples from a nearby orchard.

When Edward retired from the lighthouse service, he joined Her Majesty's Customs up in Belfast, as a clerk. He died at 26, Salisbury Street, Belfast in 1890.

Anne Gregory lived to the ripe old age of 88. She was buried in Belfast City Cemetery in 1907 with her husband and three of her sons.


GREGORY — October 10, at her residence, 14, Bryansford Street, Ann Gregory, wife of Edward Gregory (late Gov. Irish Lights), aged 88 years. Funeral private. American papers please copy.

Belfast Newsletter 12th October 1907 (I think it may be assumed that Edward was never a Governor of Irish Lights. It may well be a typo for 'Late of Irish Lights.')

Sources:
Petty Sessions Order Books Galway 1st December 1857
The Clare Journal January 10th 1860
The Galway Mercury January 14th 1860
Genealogical research by Gregory descendant Pauline Ramos

Samphire Island drownings

Memorial to drowned mariners on Fenit pier

Since 1846, the shipowners of Tralee had been advocating for a light at the entrance of Tralee Bay to guide ships past the rocks off the headland at Fenit. In what must have been some sort of Ballast Office record, it only took eight years for the lighthouse and keepers' dwellings to be constructed on the outer of the two Samphire Islands, the light being exhibited for the first time on 1st July 1854, at a cost of £7,036 18s 5d.

Today's visitors to Fenit may wonder why there is a Little Samphire Island but no corresponding Great Samphire Island. The first edition Ordnance Survey map shows two Samphire Islands at the location, lying roughly 1200 yards apart, Little Samphire, one third of an acre in area, lying off the headland and Great Samphire Island, to the east, with an area of about an acre. Great Samphire lost its insularity when the Fenit harbour was constructed in 1880 and now a large statue of St. Brendan the Navigator stands on the former island staring over to the lighthouse and beyond.

The samphire incidentally is a small plant with white flowers that is sometimes used in cooking. It grew abundantly on both islands.

There is not much of a sea between the mainland and the Little Samphire Island. In fact, it dries somewhat at low tide and it is sometimes possible to wade across, if you're quick enough. Because of this, you would think that Samphire Island, unlike other offshore islands, would not be liable to tragic incidents on this very short journey. But it is always dangerous to underestimate the power of the sea, as two incidents in the early years of the lighthouse indicate.

Garrett Moore was a labourer, living at Talaght aka Talaught on the mainland just across the narrow gap from the lighthouse. On one weekend in early November 1858, he was engaged, with two other men, as a labourer loading sand into a hooker for ballast at Great Samphire Island, the more easterly of the two islands that now has the pier attached to it. The coastguard on the mainland saw him on the rock with what they thought may have been a gun but was, in all probability, a shovel.

The job done, the boat left for Kilrush and, with low tide approaching, gave the young man a lift to Little Samphire Island on their way out of the harbour. As has been stated, the gap between this island and the mainland is sometimes shallow enough to wade across, as has often been done before and since.

And that was the last that anybody saw of him alive. His body, with its face completely disfigured, was discovered by the lightkeeper's daughter on the rocks of her island. Her father was out in a boat and she signalled to him that something was wrong. On his arrival, he, in turn, signalled to the coastguard and they came out and removed the body.

The inquest gave the cause of death as 'supposed accidental drowning' and it was generally assumed that the young man got caught out by the tide on the short walk from the lighthouse island to the mainland, his face disfigured by coming into contact with the rocks where he was found.

There are a few gaps in this story. How did Moore's two companions get back to the mainland and why were they not questioned at the inquest? Did he go to Little Samphire on his own or with his workmates? And how could he have misjudged the tide on such a short walk? As has been stated, one would have imagined that there was little likelihood of deaths occurring on such a short, shallow stretch of coast.

Yet, incredibly, less than three years later, on Saturday October 15th 1861, with the lighthouse on Little Samphire Island now seven years old, another tragedy occurred claiming the lives of two local men and nearly doing for a third.

The contract for supplying the lighthouse with water and for conveying provisions and people to and from the lighthouse was held by a local boatman named Florence Sheehan. Described as industrious but poor, like Garrett Moore, he lived at Talaght or Talaught, on the coast opposite the island.

It was the habit of the lightkeeper at the time[2] to visit Tralee of a Saturday to purchase any provisions that might be needed and the boatman, with a local lad named John Parker and a daily hire named Ryle (other reports call him Ryal or Ryan) from near the Maharees, rowed out to the island to pick him up. This they did and deposited him at Fenit where he took a horse and cart into Tralee.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon, a fearful gale blew up, the violence of which that part of the coast had not seen for many a year, according to the newspaper

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[2] This was probably Henry Redmond, brother of Mary Anne Redmond, one half of the Maidens lovers *(see pages 32-33)*

report. It blew from every point of the compass and did not abate for twenty-four hours, starting off as an easterly gale and ending as a north westerly.

So when the lightkeeper arrived back from Tralee, the storm was in full swing. Still it wasn't that far to the lighthouse and the four men arrived there around five o'clock, although they reportedly had some sort of 'narrow escape,' the details of which were not reported. Because of this, the lightkeeper entreated the three boatmen to stay at the lighthouse overnight and not return until some improvement occurred in the weather but the men would not heed him.

"*We'll escape as well returning, as we did coming to the island*," they said and set off on the short journey back to Fenit.

Little Samphire Lighthouse (Photograph courtesy Tony Higgins) In the author's humble opinion, it is located in one of the most beautiful locations of any light on our coastline.

And, to be fair, they nearly made it. They were only ten or twelve yards from the shore when a massive wave capsized their tiny boat and they were all swept into the raging sea.

Sheehan and Ryle, who were both unmarried, were lost immediately but John Parker, who was a big, strong lad, hung onto the boat for dear life and used all his strength to battle his way onshore. Totally spent and in a state of near exhaustion, he somehow managed to crawl in the pitch darkness to the nearest cottage and raise the alarm. Another account states it was the coastguard station he reached.

At once, the local boatmen set out and managed to find one of the lifeless bodies very quickly. The second, however, was only discovered the following morning.

Early on Monday morning, Father O'Connell celebrated a solemn Mass for the Dead at Sheehan's house with the bodies of '*the two fine young men*' stretched out on the table. At the most solemn part of the service, the congregation suddenly heard a loud, pitiful wail and the distraught figure of Ryle's widowed mother burst into the house. She lived at Kilshannig, on the eastern 'claw' of the Maharees, and a boat had been sent across to Fenit on the Sunday to acquaint her with the news. The deceased had been her only son and her only support in her old age and she had come back over with the boatmen early on the Monday morning.

The poor woman took her son's body back around the coast via Blennerville to the graveyard at Kilshannig and everywhere on her route, people stopped working in the fields and accompanied the sad procession for at least some of the way. The graveyard at Kilshannig is right on the coast and occasionally the sea encroaches. Human bones are sometimes uncovered as a result.

Sign at Kilshannig graveyard

Florence Sheehan was buried at nearby Churchill where *"his family, the rude forefathers of the hamlet, sleep."*

Sources:
Cork Examiner 14th October 1861
Tralee Chronicle 15th October 1861
Kerry Evening Post 16th October 1861
and others

Tuthill, Hook Head

From the Evening Freeman, 14th March 1861: -

A Sad Catastrophe[3] *- A melancholy accident occurred at Hook Tower, co. Wexford, on Monday, the 11th inst.: - A fine boy, about 14 years old, son of Mr. George Tuthill, farmer, went to drown a cat that was killing and devouring some pet pigeons that he took great interest in. He unfortunately stepped on a rock over which the sea was beating occasionally at the time, to throw the cat in, and to which there was a heavy stone attached by a piece of rope, by the weight of which he was precipitated into the sea and drowned, within about forty yards of his father's house. It is impossible to express the father's grief who was just in time to behold his child sink into the boiling surf.* (Another version has the cat clawing the boy's arm, causing him to fall in)

There is a question as to whether this sad story, which dovetails very neatly with the Daniel Morgan and the puffin incident on Inishtearaght (*see page 98*), should be included in the book, as neither the father nor the son actually lived at the lighthouse. Griffiths Valuation lists a George Tuthill as living two plots of land up from the lighthouse and the report above states he was a farmer.

On the other hand, Tucks Tweedy, the Hook's last lightkeeper, writing in *Beam 24* (December 1995) says that he and Irish Lights archivist Frank Pelly found a record in St. Mogue's parish registers, Fethard on Sea, of a man named Tuttle (sic), listed as station master of the Hook lighthouse in 1846.

A travelogue in the *Wexford Independent* of 1865 mentions 'poor George' who had lost a son over the cliffs a few years earlier while it had been blowing a hurricane. He worked the Tower Farm and the scene depicts him cradling an infant in his arms and singing to it, while other older children gambolled about. He was apparently the only male descendant of the man Mr. Loftus hired to attend the tower light.

And then there is the circumstantial evidence regarding Edward Stocker, lightkeeper at Hook in 1830. Three of his four daughters married Tuthills, long after he left the station (some weren't even born when he left) Lightkeepers often married other lightkeepers' daughters, mainly due to the difficulty of meeting anybody else. But all this is theoretical.

What matters is that it is a good story.

Sources:
Evening Freeman 14th March 1861
Galway Mercury 14th March 1861
New Ross Standard 6th June 1947
Beam 25 article by Tucks Tweedy December 1995
Correspondence from Liam Ryan

[3] One fervently hopes this is not a deliberate pun.

Patrick Lawlor, Kingstown West

Dun Laoghaire (the lighthouse formerly known as Kingstown) west pier light, with the east light, across the harbour entrance, behind

Twelve years on from old and feeble William Capel's lonely death on the west pier, (*see page 37*) history practically repeated itself with the death of lightkeeper Patrick Lawlor (or Lalor). In fact, such was the similarities in the two cases, that Sherlock Holmes would have barked at Watson to order a cab to Euston Station because they "must to Kingstown immediately," only stopping to pick up the missing verb along the way.

By 1861, of course, the temporary wooden shed that had housed a terrified William Capel for 48 hours, had been replaced by a brand, spanking new lighthouse, constructed of cut stone, the tower nine meters tall. One imagines that, in the very early years, the keeper stayed in the tower overnight. In 1863, a charming stone dwelling house would be erected by tender into the harbour wall just a few yards from the lighthouse. It would be built by a Mr. Stapleton at a cost of £520 and would be, apparently, bomb proof, though why that should be a requisite of a lighthouse dwelling is unclear.

But back to Saturday evening May 11th 1861. and Andrew Leary, one of the lightkeepers on the east pier, noticed, as you would, that the light on the west pier hadn't been lit. Much shouting across the mouth of the harbour ensued but nothing but silence and darkness responded to their exhortations.

Although you could almost throw a fish from one lighthouse to the other, the piers at Dun Laoghaire are very long and it takes a good 45 minutes to briskly walk from

one end to the other. Accordingly, Andrew decided to row over to the west light and found the unfortunate keeper dead in the shed beside the lighthouse.

The stone shed on the west pier where the body of Patrick Lawlor was found

After lighting the lamp, the police were summoned and they arrived at one o'clock on Sunday morning. Patrick Lawlor was roughly sixty years old and had been an old and faithful servant of the Ballast Board for many years, according to the *Freeman's Journal*.

It was the final paragraph, though, that would have sent Holmes into a paroxysm of ecstasy: -

On being searched, about thirty-nine sovereigns were found in his pocket. It is a singular coincidence that when a storm raged about ten years ago, the lighthouse on this pier was swept away, and the existing lightkeeper was found dead the next morning, having in his possession forty sovereigns.

Unfortunately, newspaper reports of William Capel's death make no mention of any sovereigns in his pocket, and the lighthouse on the pier had not been swept away.

At the inquest the following day, it was declared that Patrick Lawlor had died of apoplexy and a verdict was returned accordingly. The coroner, Henry S. Harty Esq., was told that the sum of £33 7s 6d had been found on the body, and he declared that the sum of £5 2s was to be removed for the poor chap's interment, which seems a bit much for 1861. The residue, he declared, was to be held by the police until it was claimed for by the next of kin. It seems somewhat odd that an inquest could be held without any attempt being made to locate the dead man's family but the Victorians were a strange lot and this was probably common practice.

Disappointed, Holmes snatched up his Stradivarius and played a harsh, discordant requiem in disgust. If he had only read *The Warder* of May 18th, he would have learned the 'singular fact' that one of the keepers of the lighthouse on the east pier *'died about the same time,'* though admittedly he had been ailing for a good while.

Sources:
Freemans Journal, Dublin Evening Mail and *Daily Express* 13th and 14th May 1861
The Warder 18th May 1861

Andrew M'Kim, Coolkeragh

From The Belfast Morning News 18th June 1863

Melancholy Accident – We regret to record the particulars of a most melancholy accident, which occurred on Friday morning (12th June)*, just below the Culmore station of the Northern Counties Railway, and which resulted in the death of Mr. Andrew M'Kim of Pennyburn, near this city. The deceased, who was a carpenter by trade, had been engaged in repairing the lighthouses on the Foyle. He had nearly completed his work, and was finishing the Culmore lighthouse, the last of those which he had to repair, on the morning in question. The lighthouse at Culmore is, perhaps, fifty or sixty feet in height, and Mr. M'Kim, while removing some scaffolding from the top of this building, upset one of the planks, lost his footing, and fell to the bottom. He made an effort to grasp the scaffold as he fell, but to no purpose. He came heavily down on the stone abutment at the foundation and was killed instantaneously. His limbs were frightfully smashed, and his skull quite broken in by the fall. This terrible accident took place in the presence of his son, who, with some other workmen, had left Derry early in the morning to go down to the lighthouse. The deceased was a man of the highest character in his rank of life, and, by his industry, was able comfortably to support the wife* (Emelia M'Kim) *and six children who are now mourning his untimely end. – Derry Sentinel*

Emelia M'Kim was later awarded £5 per annum by the Harbour Board.

Some will no doubt have spotted that I have headed this chapter 'Coolkeragh,' yet the article particularly references Culmore lighthouse. The confusion lies in the fact that Culmore Fort and lighthouse lie on the west bank of the River Foyle; yet Culmore Railway Station lies on the eastern bank. A ferry used to ply the ground between the two. The lighthouse '*below the Culmore Station'* is Coolkeeragh (or Coolkeera or Culkeragh, or many other spellings) Besides which, the Culmore lighthouse is relatively short – nowhere near the fifty or sixty feet of Coolkeragh.

The Coolkeragh lighthouse, despite its significant size and longevity (it was constructed in 1851 and lasted until the late 1950s), has to be one of the most obscure and unknown lighthouses in Ireland. Photographs of it are extremely rare. It was part of a leading light with Coneyburrow to guide ships into the right channel from the Foyle estuary into the Foyle River.

Sources:
Belfast Morning News 18th June 1863
Letters of administration 20th October 1863

The Arklow Bank Light Vessel

On Tuesday 24th January 1865, at 11am, the *S.S. Armenian* left Liverpool bound for Madeira, Tenerife and West Africa, with a general cargo worth £200,000, 48 bags of mail, a crew of about 38 persons and 49 passengers, including eight ladies and five children. She was a screw steamer of 763 tons, built in 1855 in Glasgow and owned by the African Steamship Company.

Her journey did not begin auspiciously, although she managed to get to the mouth of the Mersey without much difficulty, passing the Bell Buoy at noon. It was here that her troubles began as she encountered *"the most tempestuous and thick weather."* A gale from the east blew up accompanied by heavy snow showers. In the wild and stormy seas and travelling blind, she fell off from her course and drifted across the Irish Sea. At seven o'clock that evening, Captain Thomas Leamon found he was safe enough in 37 fathoms of water.

Around midnight, the ship caught a glimpse of the revolving light from the Arklow Bank light-vessel and the captain realised that he was dangerously close to that notorious bank of sand off the coast of county Wicklow. He immediately put the helm to starboard to point the boat eastwards. Shortly thereafter, travelling at eleven miles per hour and at full steam, her stern struck the bank with a terrific jolt, throwing many of the passengers out of their berths.

1865 print showing the wreck of the Armenian

The captain tried in vain to get her off the sandbank and, within half an hour of the strike, it was discovered that she had been holed and there was ten feet of water in the doomed vessel. By one o'clock, the water had risen so much that they quenched

the engine fires, which meant that there was no way the water could be pumped out. From that moment, the *Armenian* was doomed, although the pumps had been ineffective against the inrushing water anyway.

Afraid that the vessel might slip off the sandbank and into deeper water, the captain then ordered the anchor to be thrown overboard. The chain broke. Then a fire broke out but fortunately that was quickly doused by the sea washing over the vessel.

The order was given to man the two main lifeboats and it was then discovered that the port lifeboat was "stove in," possibly in the act of lowering it to the sea, which must have made the captain smack his hand to his forehead and wonder what else could possibly go wrong.

In true maritime tradition, it was women and children first, though even that did not go smoothly, with the captain having to fire a shot above the heads of some men who tried to board the lifeboat. Then, some of the ladies suffered injuries from the boat crashing against the side of the ship as she was lowered. Another passenger dislocated an elbow. Rugs and other coverings were thrown from the steamer into the lifeboat to cover the ladies and children who were still in their night attire. A sizable proportion of the passengers were accommodated, together with a crew of ten or twelve, under the command of third officer, Mr. Johnson, and the small boat immediately made for the Arklow Light Vessel some six miles to the north.

The *Armenian* was now so low in the water that waves were breaking over her, one of which washed Chief Steward Smett overboard and he drowned. The captain ordered the remaining two smaller boats to be lowered and filled with as many passengers and crew as possible. At this juncture, Third Steward Watts was lost trying to bail out a leaking lifeboat. The boats set off, leaving roughly thirty men still on the wreck, which was steadily sinking.

As the foremast of the *Armenian* was causing the ship to roll, the captain then ordered it to be cut away but, in doing so, the ropes got tangled around the neck of a passenger and he was instantly beheaded, to the horror of the onlookers.

Eventually, around five o'clock in the morning, the ship settled on the sandbank about twenty feet below the surface of the water. The remaining thirty or so crew and passengers were obliged to climb the rigging as the boat was now under water. It was at this stage that a passenger named Heron, a seaman who had been hitching a ride to join his ship, was lost, being too exhausted to make the final climb. This made two passengers and two crew lost.

The thirty men perched on the rigging like flies caught in a giant spider web and waited.

Meanwhile, the main lifeboat reached the Arklow Bank Light Vessel early in the morning, with the crew in a completely exhausted state. Everybody was transferred on board and accommodated. The crew however did not believe that they were in any fit state to return to the stricken ship to try and rescue their comrades, whom they knew to be in a perilous situation. Immediately, four of the five crew of the lightship volunteered to make the journey and pushed off on their mission of mercy, leaving one man and a crowd of cold and exhausted people safe on board. The names of the four men were William Byrne and Matthew Warren of Kingstown, Coghlan of Arklow and Cunningham of Dublin.

The Arklow Bank Light Vessel had been built by William Roberts of Milford Haven and a light was first exhibited at sunset on Thursday 17th March 1825. It was one of only four light vessels (or 'floating lights' as they were then known,) off the coast of Ireland in 1860, the others being the *Seagull* at the Kish; the fate-tempting *Brilliant* at Blackwater; and the *Petrel* at Coningbeg. Her name was *Relief*, (a poor name for googling) and she was built of 'British oak.' She had three masts and was moored at the south-west end of the notorious Arklow Bank. The crew consisted of a master, a mate, three lamplighters and six seamen, who rotated every month. At the time of the *Armenian* incident, there were five on board. It had rockets and also blue lights which, burned every quarter hour at night, were a signal to the mainland that a ship was aground on the bank. It was painted black and had the word 'Arklow' daubed in white on either side. (This was changed in 1867 when a lightship was introduced to mark the northern end of the Arklow Bank, and they were labelled 'North Arklow' and 'South Arklow.') The vessel served the coast well and was eventually sold in 1867.

In 1860, the Master of the *Relief* was a Welshman; his two counterparts north and south were an Irishman and an Englishman, which sounds suspiciously like the genesis of a bad joke.

Towards midday, the steamer *Montagu*, attracted by the distress signals, approached the cramped and crowded lightship and took off the survivors of the *Armenian*. On learning of the precarious position of the latter, the captain at once set off to render assistance, notwithstanding the very real danger that he could easily end up in a similar position.

By this time the four-man crew of the ship's lifeboat – the four lightkeepers - were nearing the scene of the disaster. The men in the rigging watched them approach and then, fearing that the waves breaking over the sandbank would swamp the boat, the lightkeepers lowered the sail and glided in. On reaching the lee of the ship, they hoisted the sail again and almost immediately another large breaker overturned the boat and the four men were hurled into the water. The men in the rigging could only watch helplessly as their would-be saviours were swept away to their deaths. Two of the men were seen to rise to the surface near the upturned boat but they were almost immediately washed away again. Their bodies were never found.

The *Montagu*, on leaving the *Relief*, veered somewhat off her course to pick up the people who had left the *Armenian* in the two smaller boats. On seeing this, the crew in the rigging began to lose all hope, though this was but temporary as, once the exhausted passengers were collected, the *Montagu* turned and headed straight for the doomed ship.

The rescue of the men in the rigging was no straightforward matter, as the *Montagu* could not, of course, come alongside. The lifeboat was launched and a rope was attached to the submerged ship. Some men were able to climb down but most had to drop into the water near the rope with a smaller boat waiting to haul them out. Eventually, all the survivors were rescued and the *Montagu*, with an extra 84 exhausted and thinly clothed passengers on board made for Wexford, where the ladies and children were accommodated at White's Hotel and the rest of the men housed in lodgings throughout the town.

The distress signal from the lightship had also been seen on the coast and a lifeboat was immediately sent out from Arklow coastguard station under the charge

of Chief Boatman Coghlan. The crew made first for the *Armenian* which they found deserted. They then turned and made for the lightship, where they found but one lightkeeper on board, who had the sorrowful task of telling Chief Boatman Coghlan that his son had been one of the four lightkeepers who had perished on their abortive attempt to reach the *Armenian*.

A later version of the Arklow Bank Lightvessel from around 1907 (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

The solitary occupant of the Arklow Bank Light Vessel was left by himself until Saturday 30th January when the Ballast Office tender, *Princess Alexandra*, arrived at the station, not to relieve the poor man (who had seen four of his colleagues sail off to their deaths) but to land a relief crew of four to assist him in his duties.

Sources:
Cork Constitution 28th January 1865
Belfast Newsletter 28th January 1865
The Freeman's Journal, various dates January to April 1865

John Reilly, Poolbeg

The somewhat squat, dumpy lighthouse at Poolbeg has been beloved by Dubliners for over 250 years. Built at the end of a three-and-a-half-mile sea wall in the middle of the eighteenth century, this iconic Dublin building has been passed by millions of emigrants on ferries to England and passed by a similar number of people returning to their homeland. It is a great place for a brisk walk and for blowing away the cobwebs, even for a swim. Stand at its rust-red walls and you can see several other lighthouses - North Bull, at the end of a similar wall; the North Bank on stilts in the river; the peculiar Kish light further out to sea; the regal Baily on its headland to the north; and the twin lighthouses standing sentinel at Dun Laoghaire harbour.

Poolbeg lighthouse in 1835 from the Dublin Penny Journal*. The adjacent buildings are no more*

So iconic is this terracotta building that it is hard to believe that it was once painted black, as per the thinking of the time – red for lights on the starboard side entering a port, black for the port side. Today, red and green are the colours adopted. but, some time around 1840, the white Poolbeg Light was painted black.

One of the keepers of the lighthouse in 1865 was a man with the unremarkable name of John Reilly. He was not a young man, some 52 years old with seven children. He had become a lightkeeper in 1835 and his travels had taken him to stations as diverse as South Rock, Clare Island, Roancarrig, Skellig Michael and Rotten Island. He had been principal keeper of Poolbeg for roughly a year. (When the Ballast Board became Irish Lights a couple of years later, Poolbeg was retained under the control of the Port of Dublin and was no longer involved in the constant merry-go-round of keepers.)

While he was stationed at the upper light at Skellig Michael in 1858, his son, also John, aged 17 years, had a terrible accident. He had taken a gun to go and shoot rabbits and, descending a cliff, he placed the butt end of the gun down on the ground. Unfortunately, it exploded, the bullet entering his arm at the wrist and tore away nearly all the flesh almost to his armpit. Due to the capricious nature of the weather and the tides, it was four days before he could be attended to by a doctor.

On Saturday 1st April 1865, John Reilly was very much a man of the world. With his wife and grown-up son – maybe the aforementioned John - he had been to the Ballast Office in D'Olier Street, where he had been paid three months' wages, amounting to £16. This was paid in one ten pound note, one five pound note and a one pound note.

For reasons that remain unclear, he then proceeded to Capel Street where he exchanged the money for gold sovereigns. These he kept in a small tin box which, naturally, he kept very close to his body. You can probably guess already where this story might be heading!

When the triumvirate reached Ringsend, they parted, apparently not on good terms, the wife and son continuing their journey through the Pigeon-House Fort and back to the lighthouse. According to some reports, Reilly was, at this stage, under the influence of drink. Telling them that he would follow immediately, he went into Grimley's provisions store and paid for some flour. On exiting the shop, he was seen to get onto a horse and cart.

At twenty-five to ten, that evening, a fisherman stated he saw the lightkeeper getting up on a cart at Grimley's Beer-house ('and Flour Emporium'?} in Ringsend. Shortly thereafter, the horse and cart drove up to the Pigeon-House Fort on the South Wall. At that time, the only access to the lighthouse was through the fort. It was open to the public during the day but after a certain hour, there was a sentry on guard and a 'countersign' was needed to pass. (This was probably some codeword or physical response to a question or action from the sentry, doubtless using at least one capital letter, a number and a special character.)

Reilly told the sentry, one Peter Egan of the 78th Highlanders, who he was and the sentry, who recognised him, offered to let him pass. The lightkeeper, however, for some reason (maybe drink taken, maybe wondering where he'd left the flour?) did not avail himself of the offer and told the carman to turn around and they drove back towards Ringsend. As one paper dramatically stated, he was never seen or heard of again, although he most certainly was.

The following morning, at the bright and breezy hour of seven o'clock, a boy named Thomas Pigeon, (I kid you not) who was on his way to fish at the western gate of the Pigeon-House Fort, found a hat, satin stock, an empty tin box (also described as a copper tobacco box) and the torn fragment of a waistcoat, lying on the road about two hundred yards from the entrance to the Fort, '*at which a sentry constantly paces.*'

Reilly's wife reported her husband's absence to the police on the following morning and later identified the objects found as belonging to him, corroborated by the fact that he had had his name written inside his hat. Most of the items were found on the far side of the road from the river but the satin stock (a form of satin collar and tie rolled into one) was found against the five-foot wall that protected the unwary from falling in. It lay at a spot where there was a gap in the wall where people could throw mud out onto the strand below, evidently a past-time that Victorian Dubliners got great pleasure out of. There were footprints around the area but, as the reporter sagely points out, it was a busy enough spot.

Another report described the road where the clothing was found as being 'raked up and scored by the shuffling of feet.' The portion of the vest was of black cloth and included an inside pocket. It had obviously been torn off with great violence and the knot had been ripped from the tie. The hat bore evidence of knife cuts and its crown was broken 'as if by a heavy blow.'

Yet another report commented on the absence of blood at the crime scene and surmised that the lightkeeper had been strangled after a mighty struggle and his body was thrown onto the mud bank beneath the wall. From there, it could possibly have sunk in the mud or the high tide, five hours away, could have carried it out into the middle of the channel, from where the ebbing tide would have born it out to sea.

As with many missing person cases, contradictory rumours soon started to fly. According to one Thomas Coyle, a messenger at the Pigeon-House Fort, Reilly had definitely been seen at nine o'clock on the Sunday morning at O'Connor's public house in Townsend Street, although the owner of the house strenuously denied this. The impression around Ringsend was that Reilly 'had been made away with.'

The driver of the cart was traced and totally exonerated of any suspicion of blame for he was well-known to the police as being a man of good character.

It was said that Reilly, although well advanced in age, was a very muscular man and would not have been easily assailed by any man or men unless he had been rendered insensible by the drink. Reports also said that he had been flashing around the contents of his box to all and sundry in the public houses where he had been drinking.

During the days and weeks that followed, the papers carried continuous updates on the 'case of the mysterious disappearance of the lightkeeper.' The Ballast Board lost the run of itself and offered £5 for such information as would lead to the recovery of his body. The river was dragged around the fort by employees of the Ballast Board and the mud and sandbanks there were dug up. All reports were praiseworthy of the diligence of the police force in the case. Apparently. 'all the most active and intelligent officers of the 'G' Division were actively making enquiries', to no avail.

A couple of days later, a body was found, floating in the river by the very lighthouse where Reilly had served. The report shared the page with breathtaking speculation about Lee's imminent capitulation to Grant in the American Civil War. The body, initially assumed to have been Reilly's, was later discovered to be that of a Glasgow man named McArthur, who had been missing since 9th March.

Two weeks after his disappearance, a rumour swept Dublin that the missing lightkeeper had been found alive and well in Liverpool and speculation was rife as to how he had achieved this. However, further enquiries revealed that reports of his miraculous resurrection were unfounded.

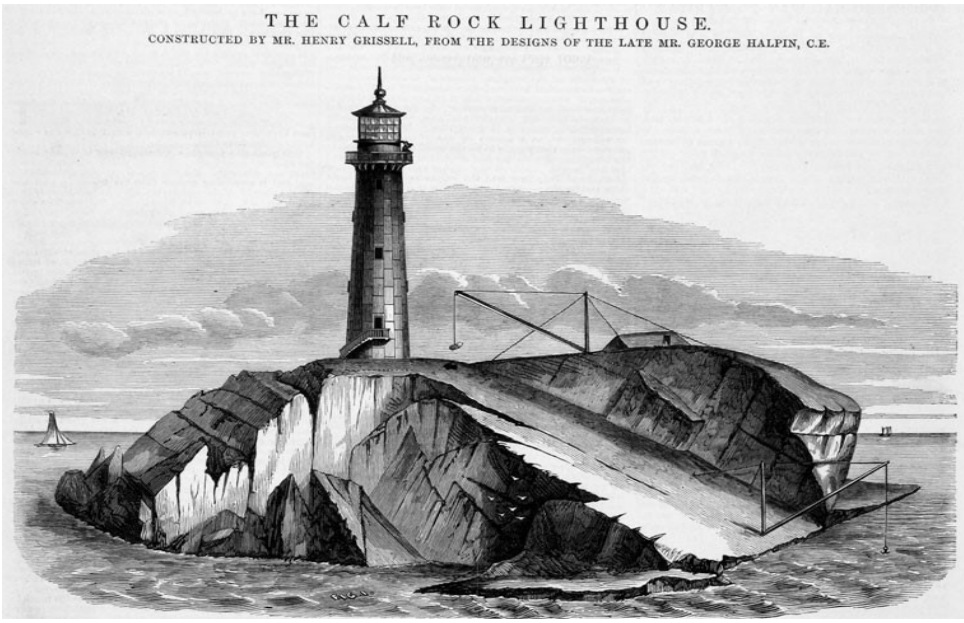
Eventually, the snippets of negative information in the newspapers died away. John Reilly's body was never found.

Sources:
Limerick Chronicle 27th November 1858
Saunders Newsletter 4th April 1865
Freeman's Journal 5th April 1865
Meath Herald 8th April 1865 and many more.
CIL Record, Robert Callwell's Miscellaneous Notes, 1860s.
Genealogical research by descendant Theresa O'Reilly
The Irish Light Keeper's Legacy by Martha Power Baxter

The Calf Rock drownings

Before *Dursey Boat Trips* started doing tours from Garnish pier, viewing the Calf Rock was a bit of a trek. An enjoyable trek but a trek nonetheless. The drive from Castletown seems interminable on a small road of wildness, grandeur and rugged beauty. One imagines that Dursey Head is just over the next ridge, which, after many such ridges, it is.

You can see the Calf Rock, off the far end of the island, from the mainland but it is a distant view. Much better to get up close and personal.



An 1860s sketch of the new lighthouse reproduced in the Irish Builder

To do this, you must take the cable-car across Dursey Sound onto the island itself, if it's running or not taken up with islanders' business. (The population of Dursey is numbered in single figures year-round but, with the tiny cable-car being the only link, any purchases, building materials, cookers, freezers, livestock etc must also take this route and consequently take precedence.)

Landing on the island at Dursey Sound, there is a pleasant walk on a decent earth road to almost the far end of the island, where the road peters out. It is here that, on many days, the wind really kicks in and the final two hillocks must be climbed in the teeth of a howling gale. Not for nothing has this island hosted the European kite-flying championships!

Resting on the top of the final hill, the grassy slope descends to the headland at Maoíl Mhór. A ruined stone building sits at the very end, the remains of a temporary lighthouse erected in 1882. A little offshore, looking very tiny, is the reason why the temporary lighthouse had to be built – the rusted stump of the Calf Rock lighthouse, surrounded by a swirling mass of breakers.

It is a stark reminder to non-seafaring folk (like me) of the terrible power of the sea, the visual proof that in November 1881, a cast-iron, 102 feet lighthouse tower, built by some of the finest engineers of the day, was snapped like a twig and totally obliterated.

It was a true miracle that nobody was killed on that night. All six people on the rock were at a lower level but there they had to stay for twelve days until the giant seas subsided enough for a rescue to be effected. News of their plight was relayed around the world and daily updates given. It was the Victorian equivalent of the Chilean mining disaster in 2010 and, in similar dramatic fashion, all the trapped men were rescued alive.

Not so lucky were the seven men who set out from the small pier at Dursey Sound on Friday 12th February 1869.

A violent storm at that time washed away a section of the railing around the lighthouse's lantern along with one of the adjacent wooden huts. The lighthouse was under three years old at this stage, having first exhibited its light on 30th June 1866. A skirt was added to the bottom of the tower the following year – in 1881, the skirt remained intact as the tower snapped at the point where it joined the original tower.

On the mainland at Dursey Head, where the keepers' dwellings were, and still are, located, assistant keeper, Richard Mallard Howard, looked out at the wild weather and thought he saw distress flags flying from the rock. He immediately set about organising a boat crew to bring him out to the island.

The weather had been atrocious for over a month and the relief boat had been unable to land. It was feared that the three keepers on the rock were running short of provisions. The principal keeper, Thomas O'Reilly, was long overdue being relieved by A.K. Richard Howard and so the latter immediately began organising the relief crew to take him out to the light.

The names of the men who volunteered to go out to the lighthouse were:

- Timothy ('Tadgh") Sullivan of Billeragh, chief boatman, who held the contract for reliefs. He had a wife, Catherine, and four young children, with a fifth to be born in August;
- Timothy Houlihan, who also had a wife, Honora, and five young children;
- Denis O'Sullivan Fune – incredibly, he too had a wife called Honora and five young children;
- John Duggan of Ballaghboy, who had a wife, Ellen, an infant son and an old mother dependent on him;
- Philip Conroy of Ballaghboy, who had a wife, Mary, and an eleven-month-old boy, Patrick. Mary would give birth to their second son, Michael in October, and;
- John Conroy, who left a wife and an old mother dependent on him. He had been married to his cousin, Julia Lynch three days previously at the parish church in Allihies.

Richard Howard himself had a wife and three young children. He seems to have been highly thought of by everyone who knew him and "*his education and intelligence qualified him for a position beyond that which he filled."* The youngest of his three children, Harriet, had been born on 6th January and his wife, Ann (nee Wilde) was still 'in a delicate state'.

The men set off, taking with them provisions, water and the mail. As with many aborted reliefs on the west coast of Ireland, they had no problem reaching the lighthouse. The problem was the landing. This they found they were unable to do because of the very large swell rolling in from the Atlantic, the pier being situated on the southern, unprotected side of the rock.

However, the boat crew and the four keepers on the rock were able to shout messages to each other and they exchanged mailbags too. There had been no distress signal and all was well on the light. After around twenty minutes, the six boatmen and AK Howard shouted their farewells, gave the men on the rock a parting cheer and started to head back.

All seemed to be going well until they were about a mile from Dursey Head and then the men at the lighthouse noticed that the crew seemed to have lost their oars. Slowly the boat started to drift towards a set of breakers and PK O'Reilly at the lighthouse immediately hoisted the distress flags in the hope of attracting the notice of people either on Dursey Island or Dursey Head but to no avail. For more than an hour they watched the small boat drifting with the tide and then a sudden shower of rain obscured it from view.

A half an hour passed and the men on the lighthouse strained their eyes to catch a glimpse of the boat. Slowly the weather cleared and at last, they saw it, floating forlornly upside down on the swell. There was no sign of any of the men.

John Swan Sloane, the Irish Lights Chief Engineer, happened to be in Castletown at the time and a message was sent to him apprising him of the situation. It was hoped that he may have been able to commission a steamer (any other boat was useless) but none were available.

For a time, the families clung to the idea that maybe one of the men might have made it onto Dursey Island and messengers were despatched there to ask the islanders to keep a look out. Sadly, due to the weather, they were not able to cross the Sound until the following day, by which time all hope had gone and seven wives, twenty-one children and two dependent mothers were left to grieve the seven men.

In a letter from 'a correspondent' to the *Cork Examiner* one week after the drownings, the legendary parsimony of the Ballast Board was brought up.

"*It is a fact to be deplored, and one that should call forth the energies and sympathies of our members of parliament, that the Ballast Board of Dublin has no funds wherewithal to relieve the misery of the survivors of those who perish in its service. This is not the case, I believe, with the Trinity Board of London, which has a large staff of pensioners. There certainly should be some fund available to provide for the widows and orphans of those who, as in this case, die victims to their bravery and in the discharge of an arduous and dangerous duty.*"

Stung into action, the Board of Trade directed the Irish Lights Board to award £30 to Mrs. Howard, £25 to each of the widows of the boatmen, £5 for each child left fatherless and the same sum to the two dependent mothers.

Explaining this was a gratuity, they added that pensions could not be given out for cases such as these, although the families in the Slyne Head drowning case in 1852 received £6 per year per adult and £3 per year for each child under sixteen. It is, admittedly, possible that the constitution in this regard was altered when the Ballast Board became Irish Lights in 1867.

Fortunately, the local neighbourhood rallied round and subscriptions were collected by both the catholic and protestant clergy and also by Timothy Harrington, owner of the hotel in Castletown, and these generous donations, many from people who could ill-afford them, helped to offset the miserly sum expended by Irish Lights.

The Calf Rock in 2015, taken from the temporary lighthouse on Dursey Island. Shortly after it was built, it was fairly obvious that it would never withstand the excesses of the Atlantic and a skirt was added to the bottom of the tower to try and strengthen it. The same was done to the first Fastnet light which was very similar in design and used to shake violently in a storm. During the November 1881 storm, the Calf Rock tower was swept into the ocean, leaving the reinforced skirted stump forlorn on the rock. It was generally agreed that the Calf Rock had been the wrong place for the light – even the constructor Henry Grissell had argued against its location – as it was far too low. It was replaced by the nearby, much higher Bull Rock lighthouse in January 1891.

Sources:
Cork Examiner 17th February 1869 and others
Tralee Chronicle 19th February 1869
The Nation and the *Belfast Newsletter* 20th February 1869
Mayo Constitution 23rd February 1869
Freeman's Journal 12th March 1869
Communication with Colin Inverarity
Discover Dursey by Penelope Durrell

The Callaghan children, Skellig Michael and Shroove

The story of the family of William Callaghan is perhaps one of the saddest of all the tales in this book and that is certainly saying something. There are tales of children dying for want of a doctor, of old men falling off ladders, of younger men in the prime of their lives with large families being washed away or killed from falls. But the story of the Callaghans takes place over a period of twenty years, a period when death was never far from the door, a period when a mother and father must have railed against the dreadful hand that Fate had dealt them.

There were two William Callaghans performing lightkeeping duties around Ireland's coasts in the 1850s. They were father and son, a genealogist's nightmare – same name, same occupation, neither fixed to a particular place which could differentiate them.

To compound this, the elder William appears to have been married three times and his third wife was still providing him with heirs when the younger William got married. And of course, the same names were given to their offspring by both men.

It appears that William junior was born in Ballybricken, Waterford in February 1827 and followed his father around the country, going from station to station as the need arose. When he was 21 years of age in 1848, he was listed as being on the payroll of the Ballast Board, the precursor of Irish Lights, as a painter. However, it appears that he was only officially taken on as a lightkeeper by the Ballast Board in 1856, as 'a tradesman in the service of the Dublin Port Corporation,' his age incorrectly given as 27. This would prove to be crucial towards the end of his life.

The very charming Ballinacourty lighthouse and keeper's cottage

In November 1863, William married Catherine 'Kate' Power at the Abbeyside and Ring Church in Waterford. At the time, he was a lightkeeper at the nearby Ballinacourty lighthouse across the bay from Dungarvan, a comparatively new (1858) station with a picturesque white tower, contrasting sharply with the stone-clad keepers' cottage. It was here that their first-born, predictably called William, was born one year later.

A second son, Patrick Joseph, followed in February 1866 and, at some time in the next two years, the small family was posted to the lower lighthouse on Skellig Michael, where William was to be the principal keeper.

Skellig Michael, off the coast of Kerry, had already been the deathplace of two, possibly three, Redmond children, at least one of whom was killed falling off a cliff. Assistant lightkeeper Michael Wishart had died in similar fashion during the first few years of the lighthouse's existence. It was, and is, a rugged rock around which nobody, let alone, ragged rascals, could run. Play areas were at a premium and Kate must have spent much of her time keeping a good watch on her children.

A third child, Mary Anne was born on this lonely outpost in March 1868 but the happy times were not to last as far as the end of the year.

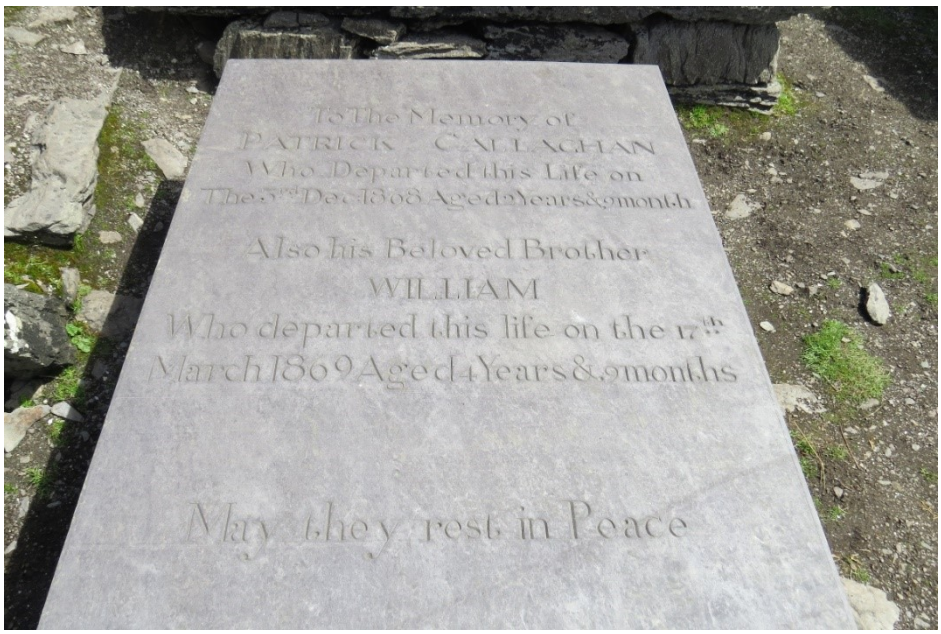
On 3rd December 1868, Patrick died aged 2 years 9 months, followed a bare three months later, on St. Patrick's Day 1869, by his older brother, William, aged 4 years 9 months. There appears to be no death certificate for either child. The two children were buried at the monastic site, a stone headstone marking their last resting places. This must be one of the most westerly headstones in Ireland.

The lower lighthouse, Skellig Michael

On 1st April 1869, William penned a letter to his employers stating that he had buried two children on the island and his third child (Mary Ann) was lying ill. In consequence of this, he asked, could he possibly be moved to another station, because he didn't want to have to bury a third child on the Skelligs?

Most accounts are critical of the newly constituted Board of Irish Lights for failing to act promptly to this plea for help and the date of the family's transfer is not known but on 22nd February 1870 – four years to the day since little Patrick was born – Kate gave birth to another daughter, Margaret, at the lighthouse at Tarbert. With Mary Ann recovered, the family was thus restored to being a quartet and it was shortly to

become a quintet when William Joseph Callaghan joined the happy but scarred band on 23rd September the following year.



Grave of the two Callaghan children, William and Patrick, buried among the collection of beehive huts on Skellig Michael

Compared to the wild remoteness of the Skelligs, Tarbert would have seemed, at first glance anyway, like inner-city Dublin to the Callaghans. Lying just off the coast on the southern shore of the Shannon estuary, it lies a mere 400 yards from the village of Tarbert, joined to the mainland by a Halpin-designed bridge. The problem was, and still is, that access to the lighthouse was through private land on Tarbert Island – today owned by a power station, in Callaghan's day, by the War Office and the coastguard. One hopes that the lightkeeper and his family had special dispensation to cross the rubicon.

Another son – Michael Joseph – was born in 1873, his birthplace of county Kerry on the 1901 Census suggesting that he, too, was born at Tarbert.

Patrick Callaghan was born on 12th December 1874. To modern-day eyes, it is slightly taboo to name a baby after a previously deceased sibling, as though the dead child is somehow being 'replaced' but the Victorians had no such qualms. It is commonplace to come across birth and death references for three different children in the same family, all with the same name. Maybe they thought the memory of the dead youngster was living on in the name of the next child.

Patrick was born on Inishtrahull, the most northerly part of Ireland. Geologically, it is actually closer to Greenland than Ireland, having wandered down from that icy sub-continent in pre-history, liked what it saw and stayed. Today, Inishtrahull is deserted but in the 1870s it had a sizable, if never overfed, population, living mainly off the sea.

In Inishtrahull, the Callaghans had, for the first time since the heady days of Ballinacourty, a bit of space where the children could roam free without fear of being washed away or plunging down sheer precipices.

On 3rd October 1876, another daughter, Catherine, was born at Inishtrahull, after which the family moved back onto the mainland, this time to Inishowen aka Shroove or Shrove lighthouse on the north-western shore of Lough Foyle. There were two lighthouses at Inishowen, quite separate entities, designed to lead vessels past the dangerous Tun's Bank, when in line. Unfortunately, the lights were erected at the same height and caused great confusion when they fused into one light, so one of the towers was raised to prevent this.

Bridget Callaghan was the first of the family to be born at Inishowen, on the 19th September 1878.

In case, this is getting confusing, the family at this stage consisted of William and Kate; Mary Anne (10); Margaret (8); William (7); Michael (5); Patrick (4); Catherine (2); and Bridget. The only two casualties were still William and Patrick on the Skelligs, which was a good return for the times out of nine children. Unfortunately, the statistics were about to spiral downwards.

While the family had been between Tarbert and Inishtrahull, William's father, William senior, had moved into the Inishowen East Lighthouse, with his third wife, who was thirty years his junior. In fact, she was still increasing his descendants up to the year he died (1874). He was buried in Ballybrack Graveyard on the shores of Lough Foyle.

But back to the ill-fated younger Callaghans now ensconced in the same lighthouse the old man had died in five years previously. Poor Bridget didn't last a week past her first birthday, dying suddenly after a 24-hour bout of convulsions.

There then followed a brief sojourn at Slyne Head lighthouse in county Galway, probably the unsafest station in the country as far as lighthouse deaths were concerned. At least fifteen people had been accidentally killed there in its forty-year history but Kate Callaghan did her best to rectify the statistics in the short time available, producing twin boys, Thomas and John, on 25th August 1881.

Then it was back to Inishowen and the deaths came thick and fast. John Callaghan, one of the Slyne Head twins, died in 1885, aged three years. Patrick, who had been born at Inishtrahull, died in 1887 aged twelve years. His death, presumed to be of croup, was very sudden. Catherine, the other Inishtrahull child died in March 1888, also of croup, aged eleven. Before the year was out, the remaining Slyne Head twin, Thomas, also died aged seven years. The day beforehand, he had come down with congestion of the lung. His elder brother William was the informant on the death certificate.

Losing four children in three years must have been a terrible blow to William and Kate. The Victorians were more stoic in the face of death but such a run of unremitting tragedy must have affected them very badly. Eleven children born, the two oldest lying in a grave on Skellig Michael and the five youngest in the grave with their grandfather at Ballybrack. Only four were left – Mary Ann, Margaret, William and Michael.

William retired from the service in 1893. He applied for a full pension, having joined the service in 1848 and this was granted by Irish Lights but then overturned by the Trinity House Brethren – the lighthouse overlords – on the grounds that the

rules stated that *"their services as mechanics prior to their appointment as lighthouse keepers are not included if their appointment as lighthouse keepers was subsequent to 1853."* So, William missed the cut-off date by three years and missed out on his full pension. There was even a question asked about it in the House of Commons to no avail.

Inishowen West lighthouse

William died the following year on 29th May 1894, after a two-hour bout of apoplexy, more commonly known as a stroke. His son Michael was present at his death. He was buried with his father and five children in the little graveyard at Ballybrack.

It is around this time that the prefix O' starts to be added to their surname, maybe due to a sense of growing nationalism sweeping the country.

William O'Callaghan had made a will and left the tidy sum of £270 to Kate and the children.

By 1901, both surviving sons, William and Michael had become lightkeepers in their own right, the former being the third generation of lightkeepers of that name. They seem to have split into two camps and were found at diametrically opposite ends of the country.

Michael was serving as assistant lightkeeper at the Old Head of Kinsale, aged 28, with his mother, Kate, and sister Margaret in tow. He was eventually transferred to Rockabill off the coast of north county Dublin, where he died of pulmonary

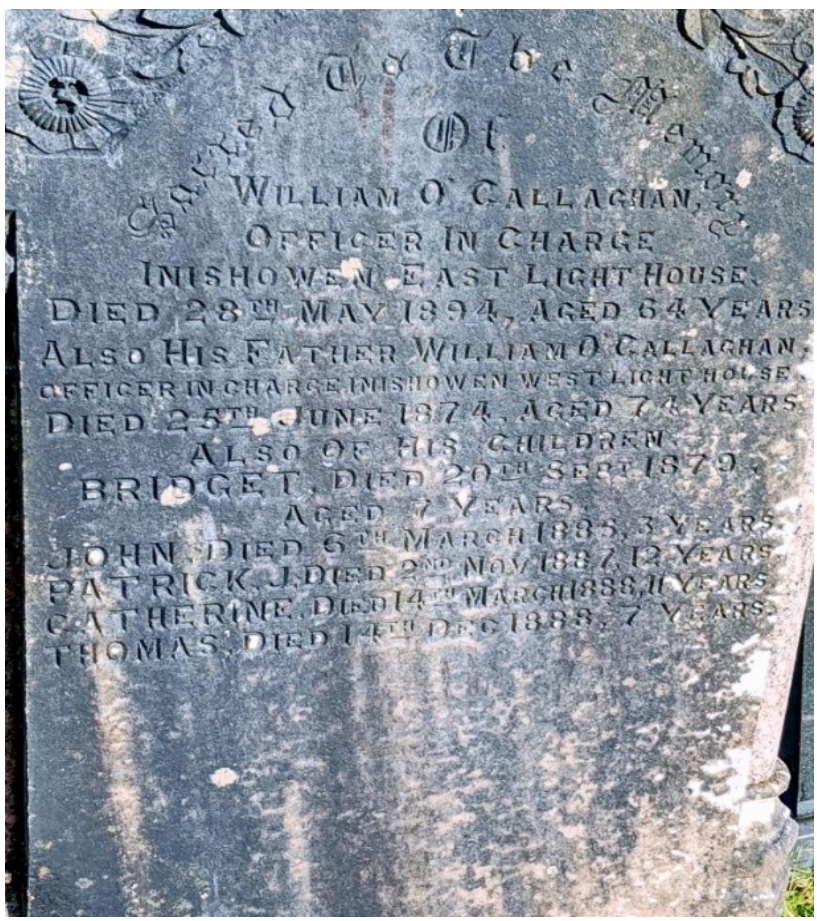
tuberculosis in 1908, aged 35. He never married. In his will, he left £193 to his mother.

The other son, William, was a lightkeeper on Tory Island, off the northwest tip of Donegal. He too was single and was living with his other sister, Mary Ann. In 1908, he married one Mary McDermott, and shortly thereafter became the only one of the eleven siblings to give Kate a grandchild.

Kate herself moved back to Waterford and shared a house with her daughter Mary Ann. Her other daughter, Margaret, became a domestic servant in Dublin where she died of chronic endocarditis in 1911, thus becoming the ninth of her eleven children that Kate had buried.

Mary Ann married a sailor, Geoffrey Power, in October 1913 at the age of 45.

As for Kate, she died in Fanning's House in Waterford, an old-people's-home, in 1926, taking with her a lifetime of memories.



The headstone in Ballybrack Graveyard, Redcastle, final resting place of William senior, his son William and five of the younger William's children

Sources:
Extensive genealogical information from Nicky Jest, Callaghan descendant

William Ellison, Belfast

Belfast Harbour 1859

All the deaths in this book are tragic. Every person left behind close relatives to mourn them and to rail at the fate that had taken them away, whether they were old, young, fat, skinny, ugly or good-looking. As such there is a poignancy felt at re-telling the story of their tragic demise.

That is not to say that there is no place for humour too, albeit a black humour, that does not detract from the sadness felt by the nearest and dearest. A case in point is the tragic drowning of William Ellison.

William Ellison was a lightkeeper, employed by the Belfast Harbour Board to maintain the light on one of the three pile lighthouses in Belfast's Victoria Channel. The Examiner says he was in charge of 'the first red lighthouse in this harbour' but neglects to tell us where they are counting from. Entering the harbour, Mitchell's Holywood Bank light would be the first; leaving the harbour it would be the Seal Channel pile light. At least this allows us to rule out the exotically named Sea of Garmoyle light, which sounds like something out of Lord of the Rings but was merely a deeper section of the channel where ships would weigh up.

What we do know is that on the evening of Saturday 23rd November 1872, William Ellison took the lighthouse's small, shallow-bottomed boat and rowed upriver to East Twin Island, which wasn't actually an island but had been at one stage. All the mud and sand and silt dredged up from the channel had been deposited onto the island and had turned it into an isthmus. These days it houses the Titanic Quarter.

It would have been dark when he tied up the boat and the tide was on the rise. And off he went into town, maybe to have a nice cup of tea somewhere, or maybe have an old pray in the local church. To be fair, he had a wife, though no children, so maybe he went to visit her.

It seems that William was longer than expected at whatever occupation engaged him and, on returning to the quay at East Twin Island, he discovered that, due to the rising tide, his boat had slipped its moorings and was now floating away in the middle of the channel. What was he to do? Without the boat, he would have no way of getting back to the lighthouse. Without the boat, his companion in the lighthouse would have no way of getting ashore.

So, he stripped off his clothes down to his skin, as you would, and folded them neatly on the edge of the quay before jumping into the balmy waters of the Lagan on a late November night and swimming after the disappearing boat. Presumably the plan was to reach the boat and row back for his clothes.

Unfortunately, the following morning, his clothes were found still folded on the edge of the quay. And the boat was washed up empty in Carrickfergus.

Two days later, the Belfast Newsletter reported that *nothing had been heard of the missing light-house keeper … and there is now no room for doubt that he has been drowned.* On the evening of Saturday, 10th December, three weeks after William disappeared, the pilot of a vessel coming up the county Down coast spotted the dead and naked body of a man floating opposite Ballywater. Some members of the crew tried to haul the body onto the boat but gruesomely, as they pulled the corpse by the hair, the hair gave way in their hands and the body sank beneath the waves.

The following day, a schooner, on the passage to Belfast, again opposite Ballywalter, passed by a body floating in the water *"in a nude state."*

Eventually, on Tuesday 13th December, the body was washed up at Kintaugh or Kintagh near Portaferry, practically at the entrance of Strangford Lough, a good 40 miles from East Twin Island. It was found by Denis Deasy at seven o'clock in the morning, lying on the high-water mark. An inquest was quickly arranged. The body was so decomposed and its features so disfigured that the coroner decided there was no need to adjourn the inquest pending identification of the body, and the jury immediately returned a verdict of 'Found dead.' Due to the absence of clothes and the length of time the body had been in the water, it was assumed to have been the body of William Ellison.

The coroner, William Davidson Esq., directed that the body should not be buried for two days to give time for Constable Knott to communicate with the relatives and to see whether they wished to view the body. It is not recorded whether his wife took up this offer.

Two days later, the remains of William Ellison were interred in the nearby graveyard of Ballytrustan.

Sources:
Belfast Examiner 25th November 1872 and others
Belfast Newsletter 27th November 1872
Belfast Evening Telegraph 9th December 1872 and others
Belfast Weekly News 21st December 1872
Downpatrick Recorder 21st December 1872

Matthew Birmingham, Queenstown

The people of Cobh are rightly very proud of their 'Spider Light,' as it is colloquially called. First exhibited on 1st March 1853, the light marks the correct channel for ships in Cork Harbour, one of several 'second-largest natural harbours in the world,' behind Sydney.

Its erection was due to the need to mark the large expanse of mud between Spike Island and Cobh Island and to ensure ocean-going liners and other large boats didn't drift where they weren't supposed to. It was located off what was then Queenstown but, since independence, has reverted to its original name of Cobh. Built on gangly legs or piles, it consists of an octagonal living quarters, above which the lantern is displayed. The piles were painted red and the wooden living quarters were light grey.

The lighthouse replaced a makeshift lightship and was designed by the eminent Belfast engineer, Alexander Mitchell. Mitchell invented the screwpile system, working on the same basis as a corkscrew, which enabled structures like lighthouses and piers to be built on hitherto unworkable sandy sea floors. He had already built the Holywood Bank lighthouse at Belfast on this principle and many more both in Britain and the USA.

Blind from the age of 22, Mitchell apparently could 'see' better than most. His son and grandson laid the piles whilst he inspected everything before, during and after construction, often discovering flaws in the iron or wood that others had missed. He had a reputation for diving down into the water to inspect the piles and he occasionally fell in accidentally too.

The lighthouse at Spit Bank, together with the one in Dundalk Bay erected a couple of years later, are the only remaining active pile lighthouses in Britain and Ireland that were constructed and overseen – I use that word deliberately – by Mitchell himself. The Holywood Bank lighthouse was destroyed by a rampaging paddle-steamer and the light at Passage Point on the approaches to Waterford was built at the very end of Mitchell's life and was probably not overseen by the great man.

Two lightkeepers were appointed by the Cork Harbour Board to mind the light and in early July 1873, these were Robert Phelan, the principal keeper and Matthew Birmingham, the assistant keeper. The shift changed at 1am and so, at 11pm, on Friday 4th July, Matthew Birmingham duly rowed over to join his colleague in the Spider Light. He had spent the day with his wife on shore and was in good form. Fifty-six years old, he had worked as the assistant lightkeeper for more than three years.

Phelan and Birmingham, who were good friends as well as colleagues, chatted together and the latter signed his name in the journal when the time came to take over the shift. The principal keeper stayed up until 2.30am, at which time he retired to bed. At the inquest later, he said he had occasion to talk to Birmingham at 3am and then slept soundly until 9am.

He did not say what the conversation was about at 3am but stated that his colleague had been in good form, as usual, and was playing the concertina which, in the cramped confines of the lighthouse, makes one suspect what the 3am conversation was about.

Upon waking, he found Birmingham *"lying dead in the oil store. He was stiff. His legs lay over the second bottom step over the oil store, with his head in by the cock of the oil*

cask. There was also some blood on the floor where he lay. His face was downwards and his hands on his hips."

Plan of Alexander Mitchell's pile light at Spit Bank, Cobh

Asked as to how he thought his colleague had met his death, he surmised that Birmingham had been up above in the lantern when he dropped a small stick used for shifting the curtains and, stooping to pick it up, he must have fallen headlong down the ladder.

During their long conversations, the dead man had told Phelan that he sometimes suffered from '*the falling sickness*' - vertigo – when on shore. He had never suffered such an attack in the lighthouse, though sometimes complained of a slight dizziness.

The doctor corroborated the lightkeeper's evidence but added a very sad supposition. There had been no external wound visible on the body, save for a trickle of blood from the dead man's nose. But he believed that the fall did not kill Birmingham. The shock of the accident, he concluded, must have rendered the man incapable of movement and, in the position described, he died. If there had been

somebody to lift him up, the lightkeeper could have been saved. Death, he concluded was due to *'concussion of the brain following an accidental fall.'*

Of course, this was not enough for one Victorian journalist, who, under the headline *'Mysterious death in Queenstown,'* described how '*Queenstown was thrown into a state of excitement by the mysterious death of a man being found dead in the Spit Lighthouse … Head-Constable Toombs … found Birmingham dead, with his face covered in blood, his nose broken and a gash on his forehead*,' which demonstrates that fake news is not a modern-day phenomenon.

The Spit Bank lighthouse in 2008, still going strong. It has recently been given a makeover and remains a most valuable piece of our maritime heritage. Note the removal of the living quarters (see plan on the previous page) since the light became automatic.

Sources:
Cork Daily Herald 8th July 1873
The Warder 12th July 1873

Jeremiah and Mary Calnan, Lough Mahon

Lough Mahon pile light (Image courtesy corkshipwrecks.net)

To any student of Irish lighthouse history, it is evident that pile lights had a distinct effect on the longevity of lightkeepers. Whereas ordinary offshore lighthouses necessitated occasional boat trips to and from the mainland, for the keepers of a pile light, they were a daily occurrence. And although the weather and waves were not as bad as on sea-swept rocks, they were still hazardous enough to cause fatalities.

They also tended to attract boats like flies to a lamp. In Belfast, visiting boats seemed to enjoy playing skittles with the pile lights, sometimes with tragic

consequences. Both Lough Mahon and Dunkettle pile lights in Cork harbour were eventually creamed by boats in the 1920s and 1930s.

From Roches Point at the entrance to Cork Harbour to the port of Cork itself is a distance of some fifteen nautical miles and, in the mid-nineteenth century, the problem for the larger ships was that, because of the silting in the upper part of the River Lee, nothing larger than a rubber duck was able to make the port. Large ships had to anchor at Lough Mahon, or even further downriver, and transfer their goods to and from lighters, who would then skim up to and from the city, which was a very costly exercise in terms of both time and money.

Consequently, some serious dredging took place by the newly-formed Cork Harbour Board – well, by their employees anyway – and at last, ships could make the journey all the way to the city and everyone was happy, except maybe the owners of the lighters.

Of course, they could only do this by day, as the channel was very narrow from Lough Mahon to Dunkettle and, being unlit, it was not navigable at night. So, enamoured by the success of Alexander Mitchell's beautiful (and still-operational) Spit lighthouse off Queenstown, the Harbour Board decided to erect two further pile lights, one in Lough Mahon, opposite Barry's Point, and the other at Dunkettle.

The Lough Mahon lighthouse first shone forth in 1859. It was built on nine piles beneath an octagonal iron house painted white, all of which was surmounted by an iron lantern, six feet in diameter. The house itself contained two rooms for the inhabitants.

The piles were sheathed to protect the timber against marine organisms, particularly something called 'the worm,' which sounds like something out of Dr. Who. The worm was commonly found in the outer harbour but the engineers were worried that its first attempt at world domination might be in the direction of Lough Mahon, so the sheaths went on.

Dunkettle followed in 1863. It was situated at the end of the long narrow channel from Lough Mahon on the bend of the river near the Blackrock Castle lighthouse which had been burning coal on the top of its tower in 1600. Dunkettle was said to be identical to Lough Mahon lighthouse in size and design.

A Harbour Inspection by the Ballast Board in 1864 found that "*the light at Black Rock is in charge of a young woman and appears to be well-kept and clean; those in the two Pile Lighthouses were in the charge of men, who appeared to be rather too old and not so efficient as to be (in the opinion of your Committee) quite fit for the charge of so important an office.*"

Humphrey Scannell, the original lightkeeper of Lough Mahon light, applied to the Harbour Board for an increase in wages in 1873. We are unsure what the outcome was but by the following year, one Jeremiah Calnan (aka Callaghan, aka Callinan) had been appointed.

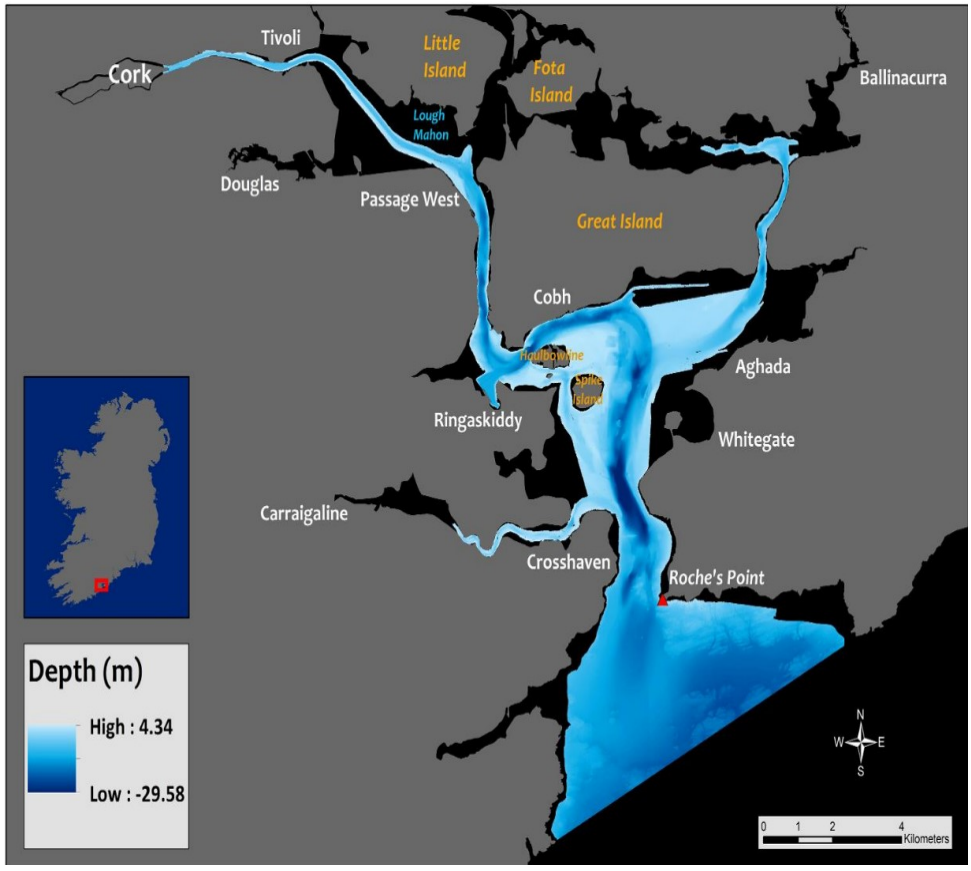
Jeremiah Calnan had married Mary (or Maryanne) Punch in Blackrock in Cork in July 1873. (One of the witnesses was a man named Daniel Kidney!) Jeremiah was roughly 29 years old and Mary was 21 and at some stage between August 1873 and February 1874, he brought her to the nine-legged love-shack in Lough Mahon. Sadly, it was not destined to be a long marriage.

A storm blew up on the morning of Thursday 26th February 1874, not between the newly-weds, but a meteorological one on Lough Mahon. It was so bad that a

clairvoyant reporter was later able to deduce that Mary Calnan became very nervous and prevailed upon her husband to row her to *terra firma*. They were seen from the shore, at roughly one o'clock, to descend the lighthouse ladder and clamber into the boat. At that time, there came a tremendous hailstorm, accompanied by thunder and lightning, which doubtless sent any onlooker scurrying for cover.

And that was the last that was seen of the couple alive. When the light failed to be lit at the usual time, a boat was despatched to the lighthouse and it was found to be empty. The following morning, the boat was found near Hop Island and the lough was dredged. Mary's body was found near the island a couple of days later but Jeremiah's body was only recovered two weeks later. The dates of their deaths are recorded on the death certificates as being 1st March and 17th March respectively which, to be brutally honest, seems a tad unlikely.

At the Cork Harbour Board meeting following the incident, Captain Raynes, the harbourmaster, was questioned – though not very thoroughly – on the circumstances of the drowning.



Map of Cork Harbour

He had been told, he said, that Mary Calnan had been seen standing in the boat, placing a shawl over her head and a sudden squall caught her and capsized the boat. As it had been stated that they had not been ashore since Monday, it was assumed

that they needed provisions. On the day in question, he (Captain Raynes) and Mr. Barry had been down the river in *The Commissioner* and if the Calnans had wanted a lift to the shore, they had only needed to flag them down. (Nobody in the Harbour Board thought to ask him how the Calnans were supposed to have known that the *Commissioner* would be passing them that day.) On their return upriver, they stopped at the lighthouse and found nobody there.

On being asked if the boat in question was considered strong enough for two people, the captain replied that he had never had any complaints about it. Besides which, a stronger punt would have been too heavy for one man to row, he declared. There had been rumours going around attempting to blame the Harbour Board for the deaths but the Chairman declared he was very glad to hear Captain Raynes' explanations. Captain Raynes added that he had recently seen a more suitable boat in the Commissioner's yard which he understood was to have been assigned to the Lough Mahon lighthouse and would the Board please sanction this? They did, unquestioningly.

At the same meeting, Michael Regan, an experienced lightkeeper, was officially appointed as the new lightkeeper at Lough Mahon. Life went on.

The question of the condition of the boat was raised again at the inquest on Mary Calnan (transcribed as *Callinan*), whose body was found a few days after the accident. The inquest took place at the house of Mary's father, Michael Punch, in Ballinure near Blackrock, who told the inquest that he had last seen his daughter when she left his house with her husband at 3.30pm on the Monday prior to the accident.

Denis Cremin stated that he was one of fourteen men who were dredging the lake for the bodies and he discovered Mary on the strand at Hop Island, lying in around three feet of water. The body had been *"partially crab-bitten,"* he attested. He also declared that the boat, which was found nearby, was *"old, waterlogged and rotten."*

Another witness said she saw the couple in the boat making for Crawford's Quay, which has now practically disappeared, but was once used for landing goods by boat and then transporting them to the city. Unfortunately, a violent thunderstorm forced her into her house and she saw them no more.

The jury delivered the expected verdict of death by drowning, adding two important statements. The first was that the duties of the lightkeeper at Lough Mahon were such that it was entirely insufficient to have one sole keeper in charge. They also put on record that the boat supplied by the Harbour Board was *"rotten, waterlogged and entirely unfit for use,"* which does not technically contradict Captain Raynes' "*I've never had any complaints about it"* but would have been very significant to anyone following the case.

However, the reporter of the *Cork Constitution* wasn't finished yet and decided to combine his obvious talent for clairvoyance with his genius for poetry in a melodramatic tribute to the young couple. The report that Jeremiah Calnan was a very strong swimmer doubtless provided the impetus for the poem: -

Dark was the sky and the wind blew high,
The waves looked white and wild.
The light-keeper's wife watched the angry strife
And she feared for her unborn child.

"Oh, love," she said, "I am sore in dread
I shall die if I tarry here;
My trouble may come and I far from home.
Take me back to my mother dear.

"These frail planks shake when the wild winds wake,
And the thunder rolls o'erhead
With sullen crash, and the lightnings flash;
Oh! carry me home," she said.

"Dear wife, take heart, see, the black clouds part
And the sun shines out on the lea.
I will row you across without harm or loss
Safe home to your mother," said he.

His arm was strong, but the way was long,
And the squall came down amain.
Oh! Christ, who did sleep on the stormy deep,
Send help or his strength is vain.

The frail bark tossed. "Oh love! we are lost,
You can swim, strike out for the shore."
"Oh no, wife no, should I leave you so
I could never be happy more."

"And must we die, my poor babe and I,
Or ever I see its face?"
"You shall see it love in the heaven above
Through the blessed Saviour's grace."

"Brave heart and true, I can die with you,"
But no other word they said.
Now Lough Mahon's wave marks their early grave
Till the sea gives up her dead.

Sources:
Cork Constitution 28th February 1874 and others
Cork Daily Herald 5th March 1874
Irish Examiner 5th March 1874
Corkshipwrecks.net

Joseph Connolly, Beeves Rock

From the Irish Times Wednesday 2nd June 1875: -

Limerick – Death by Drowning – A day or two ago, Connolly, the keeper of the Beeves Rock lighthouse in the Shannon, opposite the Askeaton River, lost his life by drowning. He had gone ashore to Askeaton. While returning to the lighthouse in a 'brecaun,' a small, frail boat, through some mismanagement, the boat upset and Connolly was drowned. He has left a wife and two children.

The wonderful Beeves Rock lighthouse in the Shannon estuary (photograph courtesy of Paul Fitzgerald)

The couple of lines in the Irish Times give us little information about the unfortunate man, but from his death certificate we can glean that his first name was Joseph and he was 35 years old. His death occurred on 26th May 1875. He was sixteen years with Irish Lights and had been principal keeper at Blackrock, county Mayo four years previously.

The lighthouse at Beeves Rock was erected in 1855 and was the last lighthouse entering the Shannon estuary that was operated by the Ballast Board and later Irish Lights. Situated at the confluence of the Shannon and the Fergus, all lights from that point on came under the jurisdiction of the Limerick Harbour Commissioners, to whom it was handed over in 1981.

Built by George Halpin (probably the father, rather than the son) its design is unique in Ireland, the tower seemingly thrust up through a row of houses and the whole surrounded by a high wall. Unfortunately, this beautiful piece of maritime architecture is very hard to see from the mainland and consequently is not very well-known.

Edward Dunne, *The Princess Alexandra*

Many people do not associate the use of explosives with lightkeeping but, particularly at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, they were an integral part of the keeper's duties. Prior to the advent of fog horns and fog sirens, warnings were often sounded from lightships and lighthouses by means of a bell, a gong or a cannon. The lightship at the Kish used to fire an 18-pounder gun when the Holyhead mail packet was due, a contraption which, it is said, could be heard in Holyhead itself.

Naturally, the use of explosives carried its own inherent dangers. In 1891, John O'Leary on Tuskar Rock had his hand blown off when carrying a gun cotton charge from the house to the gun; again in 1912, a man named Denny Duff, while firing a salute to a passing liner at Rathlin East lighthouse had his arm blown off by a charge left in the cannon previously. On both occasions, the lives of the keepers were saved when large passing boats with qualified surgeons on board took them off their islands.

Later, during the War of Independence, lightkeepers were held up at gunpoint at places like Mizen Head, Hook Head, Mine Head, Roancarrig and even the Fastnet by rebels looking for explosives, so much so that the authorities were obliged to withdraw all explosives from Irish lighthouses around the country and, furthermore, to announce this publicly.

Firing the fog cannon on Rathlin Island June 1905
(Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

Despite the dangers of working with explosives, there is only one occasion – again, with the caveat *'that I have come across'* – where a fatality occurred through the firing of a cannon.

The *Princess Alexandra*, launched in 1863, was the first tender specifically built for use by Irish Lights. Prior to this, the Ballast Board was graciously lent the Trinity House steamship *Argus* to complete their tours of inspection. Small boats were used for buoy maintenance or towing lightships and often weren't up to the task.

The *Princess Alexandra* was a steamer, 176 feet in length, 24 feet at the beam and 14 feet in depth. She was built at the Thames Iron Works in Blackwall and would serve Irish Lights until 1904.

Part of the vital and important work that the *Princess Alexandra* was involved in was attending regattas and booming out salutes from its fog guns to wow the crowds. It was on this essential activity that gunner Edward Dunne lost his life in Dalkey in 1878.

Commander Galwey had taken the tender to Dalkey on 7th August of that year to act as flagship and to fire salutes and signals under the direction of a committee of the regatta. The guns did not come with the *Princess Alexandra* but had lain in the ballast stores in Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) since the last Dalkey regatta the previous year. They had been taken onboard and thoroughly examined for the occasion. Up until the time of the accident, approximately twenty rounds had been fired up.

Towards evening, Edward Dunne, a 30-year-old married man 'of splendid physique,' and Michael Wall (physique unknown) were engaged in loading and firing under the jurisdiction of the regatta committee. A race had just finished and the winner had been saluted from the deck of the Irish Lights' tender. Dunne sponged down the gun and was about to ram home the next shot while Wall was engaged in covering the vent hole and firing, a job he had only taken over for the past three shots. Both men were experienced and highly accomplished gunners. Dunne had even spent some time as a gunner in the British Navy.

Despite their wealth of experience, Captain Galwey stated at the inquest that he had reminded the two men to be careful with the guns which, if true, must have caused a few raised eyebrows on board..

Suddenly Wall cried out to Dunne that the gun was still hot. At practically the same time, the gun went off, probably due to a spark remaining in the gun from the last firing when the new charge was rammed home. Dunne was immediately propelled overboard and into the water. Wall, who never ceased covering the vent hole, injured his thumb in the incident.

There were questions at the inquest later as to whether Edward Dunne had actually sponged the cannon before preparing the next charge but there were at least three witnesses to say he had. Water had been seen dribbling out of the cannon as he pushed down the fatal charge.

In hearing the cry *'Man Overboard'*, a seaman, Joseph Killeen, leapt into the water and succeeded in bringing the gunner to the ship's holdfast with the help of Captain E.A. Dayrell, a visitor on board, who had also jumped in. Dunne's face was blackened and bloodied and he held his arms above water as though paddling.

A Dr. Taggart was on the boat and he attended Dunne. Seeing he was in a bad way, he instructed the captain to make for Kingstown at full speed, where he was

immediately transferred to St. Michael's Hospital, arriving in a comatose state. Dr. Boyd, the hospital's medical officer, dressed the head wounds first and then amputated the left arm at the elbow.

A public collection was instantly raised to support the "*poor man … who is disabled for life by the loss of one arm and the probable loss of the other.*" However, the monies collected were destined to go instead to Dunne's widow and three young children, for the injured gunner died of traumatic shock a couple of days later. In one week, £130 was raised.

On the day that he died, Saturday 11th August, the *Princess Alexandra's* flag was flown at half-mast.

The Princess Alexandra (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

Sources:
Daily Express 2nd February 1863
Freeman's Journal 9th August 1878
Daily Express 12th August 1878 and others
Irish Times 13th August 1878 and others

John Kelly, Crookhaven

Crookhaven lighthouse

The drowning of John Kelly, lightkeeper at Crookhaven lighthouse in 1882 warranted a single paragraph in the papers when he went missing and another one when his body was washed up. And he was probably lucky to get that. In fact, if it wasn't for the manner in which he met his fate, he would probably have had to be content with a single sentence on each occasion.

Crookhaven lighthouse was erected in 1843 at a cost of £9,228 15s 11d and a very pretty little lighthouse it is too. There had been many complaints that the whole area of Roaringwater Bay with its hundreds of islands was insufficiently lit, as the only light in the area for cross-Atlantic vessels was the light on Cape Clear which was often obscured by low cloud and fog.

Crookhaven had many advantages. A transatlantic passenger landing there could be in Skibbereen in three hours, thence by rail to Cork and Dublin, reaching the latter before the boat had even reached Queenstown (Cobh)

The only problem was, many seamen claimed, that the lighthouse was placed in the wrong position, on the northern part of the harbour and hidden for the most part from the ocean-going vessels. (The station is actually called 'Rock Island' although its insularity has been eroded somewhat.) And it was also useless in highlighting the treacherous Alderman Rocks at the entrance of the harbour, where Irish Lights had

wanted to build a tower. But they were overruled by the Trinity Brethren in Tower Hill, London, who had the final say on matters such as these.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the station at Crookhaven expanded rapidly with the construction of the lighthouse at the Fastnet. Houses had to be built to accommodate the army of workmen and also to house the keepers and their families not on duty on the rock. The station was a hive of activity with keepers, boats and building materials coming and going coming

But in 1882, when John Kelly was principal keeper, Crookhaven was a nice sleepy station. It was on the mainland and a short carriage ride around the bay to the small village of Crookhaven itself. Kelly was described as a man of excellent character and an excellent officer. Approaching fifty years of age, he was a widower with two children. He was 29 years with Irish Lights, having joined as a 20-year-old in November 1853. Prior to his appointment by the Ballast Board, he '*had been in India*,' which I'm taking to mean in a military capacity, rather than as a tourist.

It may have been his early introduction to army life that was the origin of a very curious routine he followed. Every afternoon at two o'clock, he would go down to the water's edge to bathe his head. To do this, he would first remove his jacket and place it on a rock, away from the water's edge. He would then take off his watch and place it in the sleeve of his jacket to protect it from the seawater. Evidently, he considered head-bathing to have beneficial, healthy qualities and he may well have been right.

But on Sunday 16th April, bathing his head did not have life-enhancing qualities. Rather the opposite, in fact. It was surmised that, on bending forward on the rock in a kneeling position, he overbalanced and fell in. His jacket and watch were found a few hours later and the alarm was raised but John Kelly had vanished into the deep.

Bodies lost at sea are often swept away by currents and are never seen again. Sometimes, like William Ellison in Belfast, they are washed up many miles away. But John Kelly's body was discovered on rocks near where he had fallen in at the end of May, a good six weeks afterwards.

An inquest was arranged and '*acting on the medical and other evidence produced*' came up with the startling finding that death had been occasioned by accidental drowning. The reporter at the inquest concluded his piece by hoping that, considering John Kelly's length of service with Irish Lights, his two daughters would be looked after.

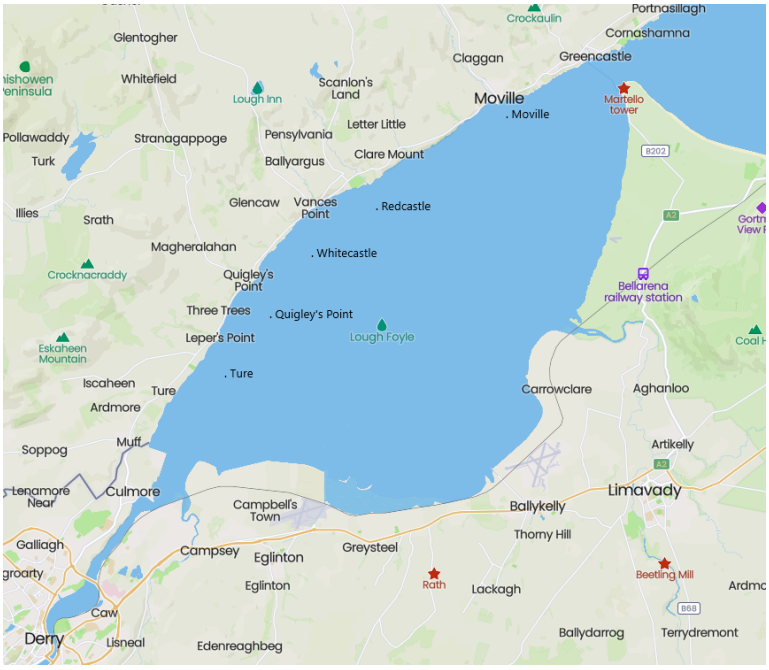
And 140 years later, one hopes that they were.

Sources:
Evening Telegraph 21st April 1882
Irish Times 31st May 1882

William McCorriston, Redcastle

Lough Foyle is a very wide inlet lying between county Derry to the east and county Donegal on its western shore. This boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic was never adequately sorted out at the time of partition, with both laying claim to it though, since the Good Friday agreement, it has been administered jointly.

From the sea, the lough runs for approximately twelve miles from north-east to south-west and is up to six miles wide. Sandbanks are plentiful and therefore from the 1840s, the Londonderry Harbour Commissioners built a series of pile lights on both sides of the channel leading down to the river. Some were actual lighthouses, others merely perches with a light on them. The lighthouses included Moville, Redcastle, Whitecastle, Quigley's Point and Ture. In general, the living accommodation was very cramped. Successive harbour reports mention the poor conditions, as well as the poor wages, endured by the keepers. Often, fires could not be lit, even in the depths of winter, due to substandard ventilation.



Map of the Foyle estuary showing the positions of the five pile lighthouses along the western shore (Image courtesy of Mapcarta)

According to Seamus Bovaird of the Inishowen Maritime Museum at Greencastle, "*the hierarchy of the lights seems to have been that the eight-legged lights had accommodation for an attendant, the four-legged ones just had lights and the three-legged and single legged ones were daymarks.*" The only exception was the lighthouse at Quigley's Point, he says, which became four-legged after an altercation with the Scotch Boat!

Redcastle lighthouse, about five miles in from the lough entrance, lay half a mile from the shore on the outer edge of the Ridge Shoal. The house was white, the piles were red and it showed a fixed white light at an elevation of 25 feet. Being a harbour light, it was operated by the Londonderry Harbour Board.

In 1885, the light was attended by 73-year-old William McCorriston (the name was common on both sides of the Foyle estuary and was spelled in a variety of ways. One Magnus McCorriston, possibly from Iona, had been the seventh century abbot of a mediaeval church in Culdaff further up the Inishowen peninsula.) The harbour board tended to appoint more senior keepers for some reason, though the lights were frequently found to be run by their wives.

Basically, the job entailed rowing out to the lighthouse at sunset, tending the light until sunrise and then rowing home. Some keepers supplemented their income by fishing or farming, as wages were not particularly high.

On Monday evening, 23rd March 1885, William McCorriston set out to make his normal trip in his flat-bottomed boat to the lighthouse. He obviously arrived because the boat was later seen hanging on the davits of the lighthouse, where it was staged when not in use. This point, along with the fact that it was noticed that the light was not lit that night, alerted people onshore to the fact that something must have been wrong and they rowed out the following morning to find the lighthouse empty. It was conjectured at the time that, shortly after reaching the lighthouse, William had slipped on the platform and toppled into the water.

An anecdotal retelling of the incident, by the great-grandson of the unfortunate man, who heard it from his grandfather, tells the tale slightly differently. Apparently, William had been the lightkeeper for several years when the accident occurred. He had slipped and fallen from the lighthouse ladder into the 'violent stormy sea.' He had been attempting to go ashore for the weekly supplies and had been wearing his new boots. His last words were "*May God bless me."*

The body was not recovered immediately due to the perverse tides of the lough. In fact, it was not until Thursday 30th April, nearly six weeks after he 'mysteriously disappeared', that his body was spotted off the coast of Greencastle, a further five miles up the coast, where the lough meets the open sea. The man responsible for retrieving William from his watery grave was *"Captain McLaughlin's servant."*

The inquest was held the following day in Greencastle under the direction of James E. O'Doherty, coroner, and a 'competent jury', of which William Press was the foreman. The jury were reminded that Mr. McCorriston had been missed on the morning of Sunday 22nd March, in consequence of the light not being lit the night just passed. From the evidence given, it appeared that the deceased had left for the lighthouse on Thursday 19th March and was not due home until Sunday 22nd, which makes one wonder if the inquest took place in a public house. The discrepancy in the dates notwithstanding, the notion that an old man would spend three days in a cramped box when only half a mile from home is somewhat ludicrous. Furthermore, they stated that the poor man must have fallen over the edge of his boat which, again, makes no sense, if the boat was hanging on the davits.

But at least they were probably correct in their verdict of 'accidental drowning,' which appears on William's death certificate.

On Monday 15th June 1885, it was reported in the Derry Journal that the Harbour Board had agreed to award a grant of £5 to Ann McCorriston, William's widow, for the death of her husband. Not knowing William's character, it is not known whether Ann considered this a good exchange.

Ann was still living off this windfall in Redcastle on the 1911 Census, aged 85.

In hindsight, we may criticise the Harbour Board for appointing older men as lightkeepers and indeed, they may have had little choice, considering the pittance they were paying out but, if this book shows nothing else, it is that accidents can happen to old and young alike.

Redcastle lighthouse c.1905 (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

Redcastle lighthouse is no more. Along with Whitecastle, Quigley Point, Ture and Coneyburrow, it underwent many repairs and refurbishments down through the years until, like Trigger's brush, there was probably little left of the original. It was made automatic unwatched in the years leading up to the middle of the twentieth century and was finally dismantled in the sixties, together with the other pile lights.

Today, only the Moville light remains, a large spider light of memory in the middle of the Foyle estuary.

Sources:
"A thousand years and then some" by David Duddy
Derry Journal 25th March 1885 and others
Freeman's Journal 2nd May 1885
Correspondence with Ena McCarron and MJ Quinn, family

John Gardiner, Arranmore Island

From the Donegal Independent 13th July 1889: -

Information has reached the mainland of Donegal of the supposed drowning of one of the Lighthouse-keepers on Arranmore Island. On last Thursday morning, at an early hour, Mr. Gardiner, the assistant lightkeeper, went down the cliffs close to the light tower for the purpose of fishing, and has not since been heard of. The crew of a fishing boat, going out to meet the Liverpool and Sligo steamer, saw him on the rocks, and when returning they reported that the sea had got much heavier along the shore, and was washing over the rocks far above where the unfortunate man was standing. He was a splendid swimmer, and would have been able to regain the shore, but it is supposed that he got stunned by coming into contact with the rocks. A good look out is being kept, but the body has not yet been found. The deceased was a native of Cork. A painful circumstance connected with the occurrence is that the deceased's mother died about a week ago, and his sister came to live with him after that.

There is no further word in the papers that I am aware of, on this unfortunate incident but the 'supposed drowning' became reality when John Gardner's (sic) death certificate was issued following an inquest on 2nd August 1889. Inquests in drowning cases were usually held the day following the discovery of the body, so we assume that John was in the water for nearly four weeks. The date of death is given as 4th July 1889, the cause as accidental drowning and the victim a 26-year-old bachelor.

The flat stone that John was fishing from has henceforth been known as *Leac Ghardiner*.

A lighthouse on Arranmore Island was first established in 1798 by Thomas Rogers, one year after he completed the South Rock. It underwent significant improvements in the period 1817-24 and then was deemed obsolete when the Tory Island light came on board in 1832. After many representations, it was rebuilt in 1865, using masonry and rubble from the old tower. (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

Mary Somers, Mew Island

In 1984, lightkeeper Reggie Hamilton wrote a very detailed essay entitled *Mew Island – The First Hundred Years,* chronicling, in a very easy-to-read narrative, the history of this lighthouse which was first established in 1884. Amongst the many nuggets of information, he details the very sad story of the ten-year-old daughter of Assistant Keeper R.S. Somers, who came to visit her father out on the island on a relief day and in a carefree manner wandered into a swamp in the centre of the island and drowned.

This must have been related to Reggie anecdotally for there is no record of this event happening although, as with many family stories, it appears there was an element of truth in it.

Richard Isaac Sinon Somers was born on Scattery Island in 1873 when his father Bernard was lightkeeper there. In fact, Bernard was probably the first lightkeeper at the station as the light was first exhibited in December 1872. A one-family station, with Bernard's wife, Mary, acting as assistant, it was a calm and tranquil reward after the rigours of the Fastnet, the Maidens and Slyne Head.

Richard had an older brother called Daniel and the two boys were the only ones who followed their father into the lightkeeping business. Daniel married Frances (Fanny) Ryan in 1886 while he was stationed at Poer Head in county Cork, the only Irish Lights location that had no light. It was a fog station, operating to the east of Roches Point.

Daniel and Fanny's first child, Mary, was born there the following year and another daughter, Kate, arrived in 1888. Shortly thereafter, Daniel was transferred to Mew Island at the southern entrance of Belfast Lough in county Down, where he served as assistant keeper. The family's third child, William Bernard, was born in April 1890.

When the lighthouse at the Copelands was changed from Lighthouse Island to Mew Island in 1884, dwellings were established in the north part of Donaghadee for the keepers' families and so Reggie Hamilton was probably right in saying that the child was on Mew Island for a brief visit with the relief boat.

And so it was that, on 21st August 1890, Daniel brought his eldest daughter, Mary, down to the shoreline. The story, handed down by the surviving daughter, Kate, was that he had only turned around for a minute and, when he turned back, she was dead, drowned in a rock pool. As her death certificate states, she was three years one month old.

It was said that Daniel never recovered from this incident, blaming himself for the loss of his young daughter. The grief, distress and guilt inside him very quickly manifested itself as illness and he followed Mary to the grave less than five months later in January 1891. The death certificate lists the cause of death as phthisis and dysentery, yet it was patently obvious what the real reason was. He was 26 years old.

And just to compound matters, baby William Bernard succumbed to a two-day fit of convulsions just shy of his first birthday in April the same year.

Source: -
Genealogical and anecdotal information from Michelle Briggs, descendant

Daniel Morgan, Inishtearaght

It has been estimated that fewer than one per cent of the world's population have ever seen the planet Mercury, despite being visible from anywhere on the earth's surface. The reason is that it is low down near the horizon, not particularly brilliant and only peeps out for an hour or two per day at most.

A cute and cheeky puffin eyes the intruder

Mercury, though, must believe it is the centre of earth's attention compared to the lighthouse at Inishtearaght – *an Tiaracht* - which is only ever seen by the odd lighthouse technician and a few hardy fishermen. Pleasure boats on scenic cruises do not venture out that far and the fact that this most westerly of European lighthouses, (excluding Iceland) lies on the far side of this distant pyramid means it could safely sunbathe in the nip if it so desired. Irish lighthouse spotters are able to photograph practically all our lights but are left scratching their heads when it comes to Tearaght.

The south-west coast of Ireland, from the Old Head of Kinsale to Loop Head remained dark for the eighteenth, and the first quarter of the nineteenth, centuries, despite the enormous toll in shipwrecks taken by the islands of Roaringwater Bay and the five fingers of the Cork and Kerry peninsulas.

Slowly, the lights started to come on. Cape Clear in 1818; Skellig Michael in 1826; Crookhaven in 1843; the Fastnet in 1854 and so on. But progress was painfully slow, mainly due to the procrastination of the Ballast Board in selecting the best sites for their life-saving beacons. And, even when they did, they sometimes got it wrong – Cape Clear was too high; the Calf Rock was too exposed; the Upper Skellig light was unnecessary.

Eventually, it came down to a toss-up whether to place a light on the Foze Rocks or Inishtearaght (*the westerly island*, in Irish.) The argument, mainly between Trinity House in London and the Ballast Board in Dublin, droned on for upwards of twenty years until six years of strike-threatened, arduous construction work finally saw the lighthouse and keepers' dwellings erected on the first day of May 1870 on the inhospitable island of Tearaght.

Inhospitable it may have been but not, according to the Ballast Board, uninhabitable for the families of the keepers were also housed on the island. The few tiny, relatively flat areas of the island were painstakingly scraped into poor vegetable plots, which never were very productive, due to the scouring sea breeze and it is said that young children were often tethered on ropes to prevent them straying over the cliff.

Today, helicopters make the trip to the lighthouse in minutes but even they are often thwarted by the weather. Back in the nineteenth century and, indeed, well into the twentieth century, relief boats were often prevented from landing for weeks by rough seas. Fresh food and water were often at a premium and the lightkeepers and their families often reverted to being hunter-gatherers to supplement their rations.

And so, around 2pm on Sunday April 10th 1892, Assistant Keeper Daniel Morgan and Charles George Hawkins, sixteen-year-old son of Principal Keeper Charles Hawkins, set off to procure some birds' eggs. One would presume that Charles George would have been glad of any excuse to get out of the house. He had a six-months pregnant mother (Alice), four sisters and a one-year-old brother, which must have been rather claustrophobic on the tiny ledge high above the crashing waves of the Atlantic.

The AK and the PK's son were after the eggs of the '*sea-parrot'* as they called it, the docile, phlegmatic seabird that we know today as the puffin. As anybody who has ever been to Skellig Michael can attest, these birds sit placidly in front of their tunnelled nesting burrows while hundreds of tourists plod wearily up the ancient stone steps inches away from them. Terns and gannets may flap and scream wildly at the intruder but the sea-parrot merely blinks in a disinterested sort of a way.

The two men made their way to a spot known as 'Lazy Man's Cliff,' the reasons for this sobriquet lost in the mists that often douse the island. Slowly, Morgan clambered down the edge and made his way down to the ledges where the puffins were nesting, while Charles watched attentively.

Gaining a firm hold, Morgan lifted a puffin from its nest and collected the egg or eggs, placing them carefully in his pocket. All went well until he unwisely chose a puffin that had got out of bed on the wrong side that morning. Objecting to the notion that her children should be destined for the frying pan, she reared up and bit the assistant keeper viciously on the finger. As the sixteen-year-old Charles looked down in horror from above, the keeper, in pulling back his hand, overbalanced and tumbled 50 feet down the sloping rock before plunging over the cliff into the sea below. The newspaper reports vary from 250 feet to 600 feet as the size of the death plunge.

It is hard to imagine the state of Charles' mind as he scrambled back along the pathway to the lighthouse. So treacherous was the island that ropes had been strung along much of the way, remnants of which can still be seen by those fortunate enough to visit today. He would have known that the assistant keeper was dead and that all hope of a rescue was impossible. Even the prospect of recovering the body was so small as to be negligible.

The distress signals were sent out and Head Constable Roe went out to determine the particulars of the incident. The early reports were wildly inaccurate and must have caused considerable anxiety to relatives on the mainland. For example, it was supposed to have been the lightkeeper and his son who had drowned, as neither had returned from an egg-foraging expedition.

A solitary keeper keeps watch at Tearaght, c.1906
(Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

It is tempting to think that the death was some form of karma and, from a 21st century viewpoint, it is not difficult to agree. But in the 1800s, puffins were widely harvested for their meat and their feathers all along the coast of Ireland with little appreciable diminution of their vast numbers. In fact, they may well have kept island populations alive during the famine. It is only in modern times, of relevant luxury, that stealing birds' eggs is seen as taboo.

Sadly, we know next to nothing about the man who met his death in such a bizarre way. He was thirty years old but we do not know if he was married or single, or if he had family, or where he was born.

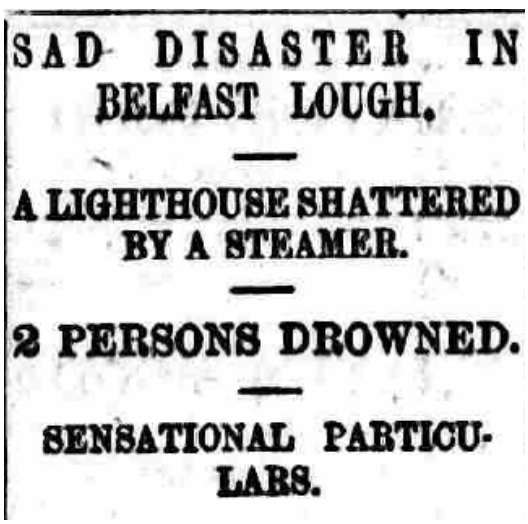
He was probably a brother of James Morgan, the mate of the ill-fated Lightship *Puffin* – oh, irony of ironies - which sank with a loss of all hands in 1896. It was quite common for brothers to serve in Irish Lights and James' father, who died in 1902, was called Daniel, a naval pensioner, originally from Wales but many years in Cork. But that is mere supposition.

The place where Daniel Morgan died is no longer known as 'Lazy Man's Cliff.' It is called Morgan's Valley. However, like 'Lazy Man's Cliff,' the reason for the name has been largely forgotten.

Sources:
Irish Independent 14th April 1892
Kerry Evening Post 27th April 1892
Irish Examiner 30th March 1962
The Field 2nd July 1892

James and Ernest Cooke, Belfast No. 2 Lighthouse

Many of the accidental deaths in this book take place outside the comparative safety of the lighthouse itself. People have been swept off rocks by freak waves, or have fallen over cliffs, or maybe drowned on their way to or from the lighthouse in question. The case of Belfast's No.2 lighthouse in 1892 is the only one where the victims were safely tucked up for the night when the accident occurred.


SAD DISASTER IN BELFAST LOUGH.

A LIGHTHOUSE SHATTERED BY A STEAMER.

2 PERSONS DROWNED.

SENSATIONAL PARTICULARS.

Contemporary newspaper headline

Belfast, like so many other harbours on the east and south coasts of Ireland – Dundalk, Dublin and Cork spring to mind - was severely hampered in its early years by the amount of sand and silt that had built up over the millennia. Entry from the Lough up the Lagan to the port was a tortuous, winding channel, accessible at very high tide and even then, not to the larger boats. Trade was generally carried on by anchoring outside the port and cargoes being transferred by lighters to the city docks.

Work to alleviate the situation took place in two main stages. The first occurred in the mid-nineteenth century when dredging not only straightened up a few major u-bends in the inner channel but the sand dug up went to form a whole new series of islands and docks, including those subsequently run by Harland and Wolff. A series of three pile lights marked the approach to these new works.

Then, in the 1880s, the outer harbour was dredged to make the whole journey from Belfast Lough to City Centre one new, straight channel, named, imaginatively, 'The New, Straight Channel.' The three pile lights were demolished and four new pile lights were erected, one mile apart on the southern side of the channel. Again, many hours were spent in the Harbour Board's operations headquarters before coming up with the names No.1, No.2, No.3 and No.4.

No.1 was the outer light, also known as the Belfast Lough light, the first light that ships would meet once in the harbour proper. It was larger than the rest as it accommodated pilots as well.

The other three lights were identical. They were all wooden lighthouses erected on six cast-iron, hollow piles and had been made as stable and secure as humanly

possible with the help of cast-iron tie-rods. They had live-in accommodation for a keeper and his wife, the reasoning being that it would minimise the danger of constant rowing back and forth to the light in heavy seas to light and douse the lamp.

Each of these three pile lights showed a fixed bright light placed in an oriel window, lighting the channel in an arc of 180˚. It also had two red lights on the landward side, four feet apart, warning ships that they were not in the channel proper. All four pile lights, together with the New Straight Channel were formally opened, with great pomp and ceremony, in July 1891.

We now jump forward to the small hours of Friday morning, 18th November 1892, less than sixteen months later. The *S.S. Medway* had left Swansea the evening before and was heading for Belfast. Built at Whiteinch near Glasgow in 1886 by Messrs. Chas. Connell & Co., she had two decks and two masts and was rigged as a schooner. On that evening, she had on board a crew of twenty hands, five steerage passengers and a general cargo.

The Master was Captain James Arnel, also reported as 'Arnold.' He had had charge of the boat for around seven months but knew her well from previous trips.

The ship, coming from the southward, passed by the light on Mew Island at the southern end of Belfast Lough and headed towards the city. Ahead the captain could see the No.1 light, about half a mile ahead and slightly on his port side. It was a bright revolving light and was clearly visible from any angle.

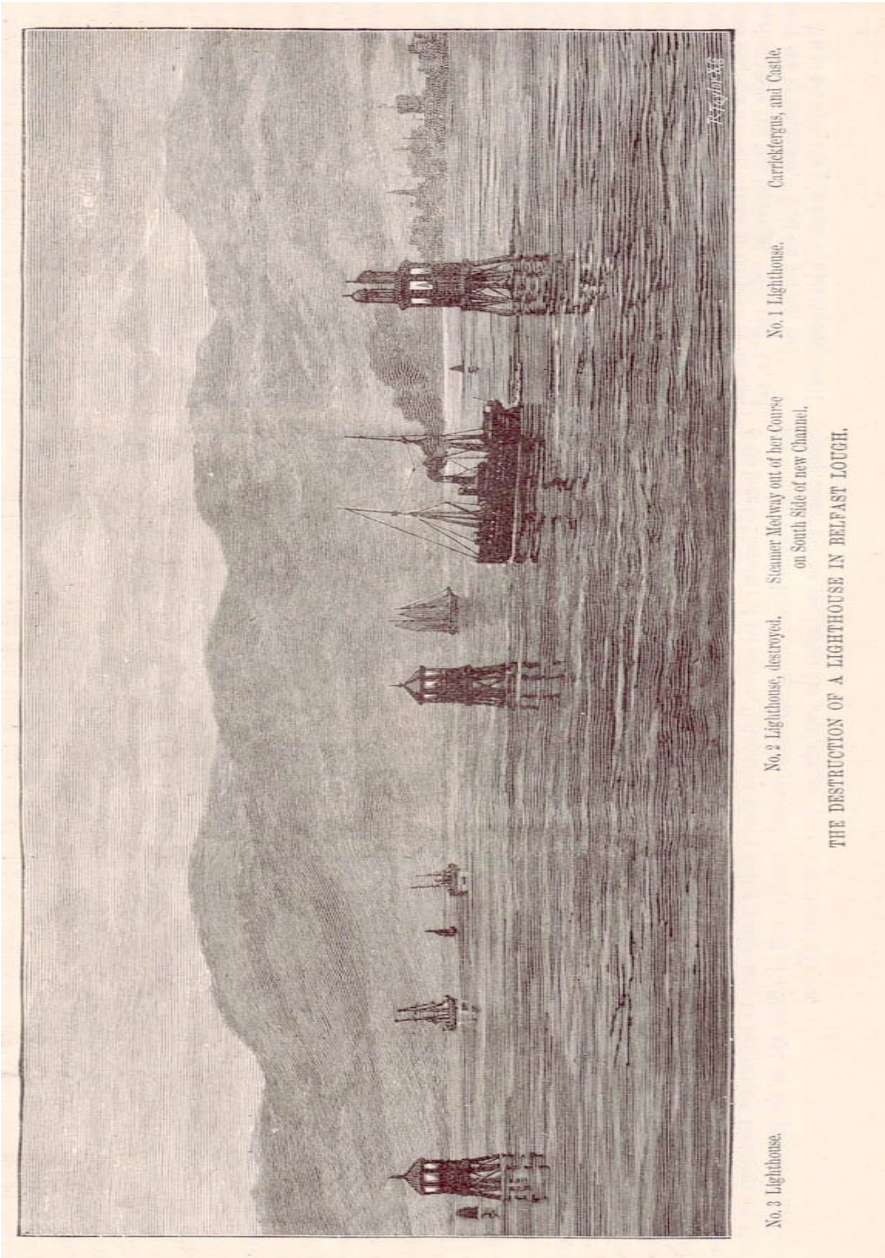
It had been Captain Arnel's intention to keep the lighthouse on his port side and stay on the correct course but, because of the number of vessels in the channel, he decided to skirt the lighthouse on his starboard side. This was not an unusual, or illegal, manoeuvre – it was the general course for the cross-channel ferries coming up the Irish Sea and there were no regulations forbidding it. In fact, many of the certified pilots regularly used this course if there were boats in the main channel.

The effect that this had, though, was that the *Medway* needed to pull to starboard to get back into the channel and avoid No.2 lighthouse one mile ahead. No.2 lighthouse, unlike the No.1 light, exhibited a fixed white light which was only visible on the channel side of the lighthouse. The two red lights, four feet apart, that had previously marked the rear, landward side of the lighthouse, had been removed the previous November on the orders of the Irish Lights Commissioners in Dublin who decided, seemingly without any serious consultation, that these two red lights would be 'confusing' to shipping.

Thus the *S.S. Medway* approached the No.2 lighthouse which at 3am was shrouded in darkness.

Meanwhile James Cooke – a grand nautical name – and his three sons were naturally fast asleep in the two cabins of the second pile light. James was around 54 years of age and was a strong, healthy man. He had been a sailor before applying for the job on No.2 lighthouse. His wife, Elizabeth (nee Orr) lived in Holywood with his two daughters.

With him in the lighthouse were his sons Robert (16), Arthur (12) and Ernest (6). Another son, Alfred, was the assistant lightkeeper in the No.1 lighthouse that the *Medway* had just passed. The light had been lit many hours previously and there was little else to do except take to the bunks, which the children did at around 10pm and James sometime later.



Reconstruction of the accident scene, (not to scale) as printed in local newspapers

The mate of the *Medway*, John Passmore, had steered the boat around No.1 lighthouse and was now relieved by Captain Arnel. Passmore went down to his room for a minute and then went to the forecastle, where there was another seaman on lookout. Soon afterwards, he saw No.2 lighthouse about 200 yards ahead but no light and called out '*Lighthouse on the port bow*' up to the bridge. He received no reply. Thirty seconds later, he reiterated his warning, again with no response. He called out

'Port the helm!' as a collision loomed and *'Port the helm!'* again. About ten seconds later, the ship struck the lighthouse

Captain Arnel's later evidence at the inquest was, to all intents and purposes, quite similar. After passing No.1 lighthouse, he said, he noticed a schooner lying at anchor between himself and No.2 lighthouse. On rounding it, he heard the mate calling out that the lighthouse was on the port bow. He immediately ported the helm, he said and, looking up, found the ship bearing down on the lighthouse. He did not reverse the engines immediately because he thought the boat would just clear the light. On realising that it wouldn't, he reversed the engines but it was too late.

Down in the engine room, James Young stated that the ship was doing full speed of ten knots, when suddenly he got the order 'Full Speed Astern!' After three minutes, he got the order 'Slow' and then 'Stop.'

Robert Cooke, the eldest of James Cooke's children, later said that the first thing he recollected was being in the water and in the dark, with absolutely no visibility. He was holding hard onto something in the lighthouse and could hear his father and one of his other brothers, Arthur, beside him. His father told him to hold on tight, as they thought that whatever had hit them had not stopped and there was no rescue imminent. All the while, they were shouting, hoping to attract attention.

Meanwhile, on the *Medway*, a boat was lowered and John Passmore and three other seamen set out to effect a rescue, if one were needed. They rowed around for around half an hour in all directions, calling out continually but got no response. Things weren't helped by Passmore's torch getting dowsed and not being able to relight it. They saw no wreckage and they couldn't even see the stumps of the pile light sticking up out of the water. The night was squally, with rain showers alternating with patches of clear sky.

Returning to the ship, he made a report to the captain. The ship proceeded slowly up the channel. A piece of the wreckage floated by which proved to be a part of the stricken lighthouse. About ten minutes later, more wreckage was seen and a cry heard. A boat was over the side in three minutes and Passmore and two others rowed to the wreckage which proved to be the lighthouse in an upside down position.

The door of the lighthouse was locked and so they moved to a small window, which they broke. Shining a light on it, they called to whoever was inside to put out a hand and let go whatever they were standing on. The person inside did so and the first child, Arthur, was hauled out. Robert followed and then James, the father. The latter was freed only with a great deal of difficulty. The two boys received minor injuries in making their escape through the window, though one report initially stated that Arthur's injuries had been serious.

The boys told the men in the boat that there was another boy, Ernest, in the lighthouse but they hadn't heard him at all since the time of the accident and he must be dead. The men in the boat decided it was better to get the father, who seemed extremely weak, back to the boat and try and save him, rather than go back and search for a dead body.

The three cold, tired and wet rescuees were quickly transferred to the *Medway* and given plenty of care. James Cooke had a gash on his left temple and another on the back of his head. His son, Robert, later said that he didn't know if the injuries had been caused in the initial accident or during the rescue. The steward and the cook

rubbed the victims' bodies with liberal amounts of brandy and applied hot plates to their legs but it was clear that James Cooke was in a bad way. He died approximately ten minutes after joining the *Medway*.

The ship proceeded into the port where the harbourmaster and the police were immediately contacted. They located the overturned lighthouse, broke off a few planks and retrieved the body of six-year-old Ernest Cooke, who was brought to the same morgue as his father.

The inquest the following January laid the blame squarely at the feet of those who had demanded the two red lights at the rear of the lighthouse be taken away. In true management style, the name of the game was deflection – the ship was going too fast, the Captain took the wrong course around No. 1 lighthouse, the injuries to the father were caused by the rescue rather than the collision. One question which was not addressed was why there was no easy way of escaping the lighthouse in an emergency? The four occupants were virtual prisoners, relying on outside help to avoid a watery grave.

The lighthouse was replaced by a buoy and not rebuilt. One may be forgiven for believing that the destruction of the lighthouse was a freak accident but six years later Peter Johnson and his wife, Margaret were in bed in No.3 lighthouse when it was knocked off its piles by the Royal Mail Steamer, *Alligator*. Despite being injured by falling girders and other debris, they managed to make their way to the top of the lighthouse as it floated away and were rescued. The cause of that accident was that the captain had mistaken the light from the lighthouse for a harbour light.

It is a salient point to those who have faith in oral family history that within two generations the story had altered significantly. Arthur – one of the surviving sons – had a son called Tommy whose knowledge of the event was mainly that his grandfather and Uncle 'James' had been killed aboard a lightship in 1897. Arthur died in the influenza epidemic of 1918.

The year after the *Alligator* collision, the Harbour Board dismantled No.4 lighthouse of their own volition.

Sources:
Deirdre Palladino genealogical study of her Cooke / Orr family
Belfast Evening Herald 18th November 1892
Belfast Freeman's Journal 19th November 1892
Belfast Evening Telegraph 19th November 1892
Belfast Newsletter 25th January 1893 and others
Shipping Gazette and Lloyds List 23rd February 1893

Michael Kirwin, The Metal Man, Tramore

The Metal Man at Great Newtown Head, a promontory at the western end of Tramore Bay, is not, in any sense of the word, a lighthouse, in that it is not a house, nor does it shine a light. That being said, it would be churlish to disqualify this iconic daymark from this book because he is such an interesting character and is invariably included in books about Irish lighthouses.

The Metal Man, Tramore, once known as the Iron Man, standing atop one of the whitewashed pillars on Newtown Head.

As was usual on the south coast of Ireland, it took a terrible shipwreck to wake up the authorities and urge them to spring into action to provide better maritime navigation marks. *HMS Sea Horse* ran aground in Tramore Bay in January 1816 with the loss of 360 lives and Lloyds of London demanded action.

It is actually not known who commissioned the statue of the Metal Man. Some say it was Lloyds. Others maintain it was the widow of the captain of the stricken ship. It has also been suggested that it was all George Halpin's idea.

Whoever it was, in a rare display of artistic imagination, an up-and-coming young sculptor named Thomas Kirk was commissioned to produce a statue of a petty officer. Kirk had already proved his worth by producing the statue of Nelson that stood atop the pillar in O'Connell Street in Dublin for over 150 years before it was half-blown up by the I.R.A. in 1966.

In the meantime, five pillars were constructed by either Alexander Nimmo, who designed the beautiful lighthouse at nearby Dunmore East, or by George Halpin, depending on whom you read. Two were placed on Brownstown Head on the east side of Tramore Bay and three at Newtown Head on the west flank. In this way, Tramore could in no way be mistaken for Hook, or anywhere else for that matter.

The pillars were erected in June 1821 but not before a major accident when two masons named Burke and Flaherty fell from a height of 37 feet when the rope of the hoist they were using gave way at the spliced section. Both men were seriously injured. John Burke suffered a broken spine and died a few months later of his injuries in a Waterford Hospital. Both had young families to support and both the Board of Works and Chamber of Commerce refused to help out financially, so public donations were raised to help alleviate the plight of the two families.

Thomas Kirk displayed his statue at an exhibition in London in 1819 and then proceeded to cast four identical statues from the same mould. One was sent to Sligo where it still marks the Perch Rock near Rosses Point (and apparently swims over to the shore and has a wander around once a year.) Another was sent to Tramore to crown the middle pillar at Newtown Head. It is said that Brownstown Head was earmarked for one of the other statues but it 'got lost.' In fact, the whereabouts of the other two statues is the subject of much speculation. Some claim that one is in Uruguay, others in Sydney, Australia. The smart money is on 'the bottom of the sea.'

The statue is twelve feet tall and made of cast-iron, "*with his left arm akimbo, and the right extended out, as a warning to vessels to keep off from that dangerous shore,"* to quote newspaper reports of the day. He is supposed to cry out, "*Keep off, good ship, keep off from me, for I am the Rock of Misery,"* though this has not been authenticated. The local legend that if an unmarried maiden hops around the pillar three times she will be married inside the year is another claim that science has been unable to prove definitively.

The construction crew would have made sure that the ropes were in good order when they hoisted him to the top of the sixty-foot pillar. If, as in Sligo, he arrived unpainted, one would hope that they painted him first and then placed him on his plinth.

The painting of both Metal Man and pillars is, of course, something that has had to be done every few years. On one of these occasions in 1894, history repeated itself with disastrous consequences for one family.

Michael Kirwin (aka Kirwan or Kerwan) was a local, Newtown man when, as a 22-year-old sailor, he married Elizabeth (Eliza or Betsey) Lannon in 1868. The two had highly compatible interests such as appearing in the local petty court at regular intervals, mainly for foul and abusive behaviour to neighbours or even family, not that they weren't averse to accusing the same neighbours and family of similar offences.

By 1894, Michael worked as a labourer, along with John Fleming, for a local contractor named Kelly. They did the normal routine labouring jobs but Kelly had the annual contract of painting and lime-washing the five large daymark pillars on the two headlands enclosing Tramore Bay.

In jobs like these, the common practice was to ascend the pillar in a boatswain's chair by means of a block and pulley, with the ropes attached to a stake in the ground. Michael had been painting the pillars for some years past and would have known the ropes, so to speak. He hauled himself up to the very top of the pillar to begin work, the strain caused the stake holding the rope to fly up out of the ground and Michael dropped headfirst to the ground.

The Metal Man's twin brother on his perch in Sligo Bay

He didn't sustain too many noticeable injuries. There was just a large gash on his left temple, where he struck *terra firma*, and he never recovered consciousness. He died five to ten minutes later.

The body was taken to the Assembly Room in Tramore and, the following day, the inquest took place across the road in the courthouse. The only two witnesses of the accident were Kelly and Fleming. Kelly, the boss, said that the fall was caused by the deceased not tying the ropes together and no blame could possibly be attached to himself nor Fleming. It was the start of the day, only about five minutes in, he heard a noise and looked around and saw Kirwin falling to the ground.

John Fleming told the inquest that he had '*cautioned his workmate to be very cautious*' as he ascended the tower and to make sure to tie the ropes. He even gave him three short pieces of rope to do so but the deceased evidently neglected to do this, despite saying that he would.

From a distance of over 120 years, it seems unlikely that a workmate would labour the point of caution to an experienced colleague in such a fashion. It may well have been Kirwin's own fault, but a suspicious person might very well think that Kelly and Fleming had made sure their stories tallied so that no blame could be attached to either of them.

The jury went across the road to view the body and, after deliberating for an hour, came back with the unique verdict of '*accidental death by falling from the Metal Man spire, while in the act of whitewashing it.*' They further recommended, after having a whip-round themselves, that the Board of Lights should be contacted to help the widow and her young family.

Evidently the plea fell on deaf ears. A collection was therefore set up, raising £17 17s, which enabled Michael Kirwin to get a decent burial and also to see Eliza and her children through the winter.

By 1899, however, Eliza had moved from her home in Newtown to Peter Street in Tramore, where she was given notice to quit. The 1901 Census found her in Crossmarket Street with the two youngest children, Lizzie (11) and Nellie (8). She died in Tramore in 1920 aged 66.

The Metal Man getting spruced up in the 2000s. The painter is Graeme King. (Photograph courtesy Andy Mulligan)

Sources:
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Dublin Evening Telegraph 3rd August 1894
The Clonmel Chronicle 4th August 1894
Waterford Standard 1st June 1895
Extensive genealogical research by John Kirwin (great-grandson)

Thomas Millar, Belfast Lough

Yet another death at the Belfast Outer lighthouse, which must have been the most dangerous lighthouse to work at in Ulster! This time, however, the lightkeeper did not suffer death by drowning but died in his bed of natural causes. But it did not stop the jury at the inquest from issuing a stern reprimand to the Harbour Board.

The Belfast No.1 lighthouse sat in Belfast Lough, outside of the main channel of the port leading to Belfast. Its predecessor had marked a dangerous bank of sand on the south side of the lough from 1844 to 1889. The newer light dated from 1891 and was sited nearer the mouth of the lough. It was to last as a 'leading in' light to the Victoria Channel until August 1959 when it was deemed superfluous and was unceremoniously dismantled.

On Christmas Day 1895, Thomas Millar and the improbably named Smith Hunter were the lightkeepers on duty. The former had not been to his home at 7, Carnalea Street for four weeks prior to this, according to his son, Samuel, but he had been in good health for his 54 years.

On the evening of Christmas Day, Millar complained of feeling unwell and retired to bed early, according to Smith Hunter. In the morning, he went to rouse Millar and found him dead in the bed. It later transpired that he had suffered an effusion of blood on the brain and this was what was recorded at the inquest.

There is a famous tale of two lightkeepers at the Smalls lighthouse off the Pembrokeshire coast in 1801 concerning the death of one keeper and the plight of the other. The two men had not got on and the second man, unable to communicate with anybody, was obliged to keep the dead and decaying body of his erstwhile companion in the lighthouse for three weeks until it could be ascertained that he had not been murdered.

Almost a century later, it is mind-boggling to think that Smith Hunter also had no means of communicating with the shore in regards to being in a lighthouse with a dead body. His period of confinement with a corpse was measured in hours rather than weeks but it was bemusing to think that lighthouse authorities had not come up with an effective method of communication between lighthouse and shore. (In fact, it was not stated how, exactly, he had reported the death of his workmate.)

The jury were very scathing of this revelation and urged the Harbour Board to institute a proper system of communication with the mainland, maybe flags by day and rockets by night. In the case of an emergency, where assistance was required urgently, it could mean the difference between life and death.

The coroner concurred and agreed to send a communiqué to the Harbour Board on this point. He further stated that the Harbour Board were more or less to blame for Millar's death in not having proper appliances for signalling to the shore.

At the next meeting of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners on 7th January 1895, much of the meeting was dedicated to tributes to the late Sir Edward Harland Bart., M.P., a member of the Board who had recently passed away. There was no mention of Thomas Millar.

Sources:
Irish News 28th December 1895
Northern Whig 28th December 1895

The Puffin Lightship Disaster, Daunt Rock

Because of the prevalence of shifting, drifting sands on the east and south coasts of Ireland, we have had a long history of lightships protecting maritime craft from grounding on treacherous mudbanks. Lightships were necessary where lighthouses could not be built due to unstable foundations and, while the Great South Wall was being constructed in Dublin Bay, Dublin could boast the second lightship in the world, established in 1736, two years after the Nore lightship in the Thames.

In those early days, fishing boats were fitted out to act as lightships (and, due to cost, this continued to be the case in local harbours such as Derry, Belfast and Cork) but by the early 1800s, the first purpose-built lightships came into operation. These wooden tubs were not designed with the crew's comfort in mind – they were basic, open to the elements and rolled to an alarming degree.

The main difference between normal ships and lightships was that the latter had no engines. They were towed into the desired position and anchored firmly. Such was the rarity of a lightship breaking from its position and floating away, that it was considered an unnecessary expense to fit them with propellers.

Of course, accidents did occasionally happen. Lightships were occasionally hit by passing boats; extreme weather sometimes caused a lightship to break from her position and float away (it is said that the Kish lightship once ended up at Holyhead) but it was Irish Lights' proud boast that, in all the years of operation, they had never lost a lightship.

Until the 8th October 1896, that is.

Position of the Daunt Rock south of Cork Harbour (courtesy Mapcarta)

The Daunt Rock is a treacherous, submerged rock roughly five miles SSE of the entrance of Cork Harbour. Ships approaching the transatlantic harbour of Queenstown (nowadays, Cobh) were warned not to turn in for the harbour until practically south of the harbour entrance. Those that did cut the corner – such as the *City of Cork* in 1864 – ran the risk of grounding on the Daunt.

Following the loss of the *City of Cork*, there were immediate petitions to blast the rock out of existence and to place a lightship on the spot until that happened. Irish

Lights placed a boat-shaped buoy on the rock the following year and a lightship in 1874. This remained in place until 1974 when it was withdrawn.

Incidentally, at the time of the *Puffin* tragedy, the reef was known as Daunt's or Daunts Rock. For some reason, it has since lost the 's,' possibly in a bad storm.

The *Puffin* lightship, which came into service in 1887, was constructed at Wallsend on Tyne and Wear and was one of the first truly composite lightships, with teak cladding on iron frames. She was towed to Dublin and was stationed on the east coast of Ireland, at Skulmartin.

By 1896, she was in Passage Docks at Passage West in Cork Harbour for overhauling and repairs and on 1st August 1896, she was towed out to Daunt Rock to temporarily replace the *Guillemot*, which was heading up to Dublin for repairs. Like all Irish lightships, she was painted black (this was altered to red in 1954) and had the word 'DAUNTSROCK' painted on her sides in large white letters. The lightship at this station bore the foreshortened word 'DAUNT' from 1905.

The crew of the *Guillemot*, all south coast men, transferred en masse to the *Puffin*, as was the custom. There were two sets of crews who relieved each other at regular intervals and were loyal to the station, rather than the ship. The master of the lightship was 'at liberty' – onshore – at the time of the disaster.

Rare photograph of the Puffin at Daunt Rock. She was one of the rare breed of Irish lightships to have a main mast and two auxiliary masts

Two months and a week later, on the night of October 7th, a terrible storm blew up, wreaking havoc on the eastern and southern coastlines of the country. The eight men on board the *Puffin* that fateful night were: -

- James Morgan, 36, the mate, and in command of the ship. He was unmarried and lived at Fernside Villas, Summer Hill, Cork City with his father, Daniel, a retired naval pensioner. He had joined the naval service as a boy and had served at Daunt Rock since May 1888. 5'6" in height, with brown hair and grey eyes, he was probably a brother of Daniel Morgan, lightkeeper, who was killed, ironically by a puffin, on Inishtearaght in 1892 *(see page 98).*

- Richard Dobson, 36, the gunner, Arklow-born but living in Crosshaven with his wife, four young children under seven and father-in-law, Robert Watson, at Weaver Point. With nine years of service, he was the crew member who, when the dreariness and solitude of life on a lightship threatened to get people down, would enliven evenings through singing and recitations.
- Patrick Hourigan, aged 32, a native of Carrigaholt on the Shannon estuary. Four years married to Margaret Scanlan of Scattery Island, he had two small children and was also engaged on the *Puffin* as a gunner. A strongly built man, he was a fluent Irish speaker and often tried to encourage his shipmates to try a *cúpla focal.*
- Robert Higginbotham, 23 years of age, and a member of the ubiquitous Higginbotham lightkeeping dynasty. His father was keeper of the Spit Light for many years and eight of his eleven brothers were also employed by Irish Lights. Born at the Baily lighthouse in Dublin, he lived in the maritime breeding ground of Parnell Street in Wexford and only joined the *Puffin* as a carpenter when she came on station in August.
- Thomas Supple was the oldest man aboard the Puffin at 58 years of age. He was the lamplighter and a widower. He lived nearby in Crosshaven with four of his five adult children. He had been a sailor all his life and a widower since 1882.
- Michael Noonan, 35, was also from Crosshaven, along with his brother, William, who was on the other crew. Married to Margaret (Browne) in 1894, he had one daughter, Helena, aged seventeen months.
- Laurence Furlong was a neighbour of Robert Higginbotham in Wexford and also 23 years of age. He also was a new recruit on board, joining as a seaman. Unlike Robert though, he was married with three young children.
- (William) Joseph Daly had celebrated his 26th birthday the day before. He was not a regular member of the crew but had slotted in when James Regan, the lamplighter, injured his leg while out cycling. A native of Passage, he too lived in Crosshaven and was unmarried.

These eight men were on board the ill-fated *Puffin* as the south-south-westerly storm broke on the night of Wednesday October 7th. The storm wreaked widespread damage around the coasts and inland too, with a lot of flooding reported from Cork to Waterford to Dublin. The South Arklow lightship broke its moorings and drifted ten miles. As Wednesday gave way to Thursday, the storm increased in its fury. The wind changed direction and the sea became a foaming torrent of colliding waves.

At around 4.30am with the storm at hurricane force, a coastguard in nearby Robert's Cove, which was being swamped by the angry waves, reported losing sight of the *Puffin*'s light. At the same time, at Roches Point at the entrance to Cork Harbour, *"the sea rose two feet higher than ever before,"* according to one witness and two other seamen also reported that they lost sight of the *Puffin* light.

When dawn broke, the *Puffin* had disappeared. Had she sunk at her moorings, or had she broken her forty-ton chain and was drifting somewhere at the mercy of the tide? It was a mystery that was to engage the Irish population for the next month.

Initial reports stated that ten men had been on the lightship, including Michael Doyle, the master, and James Regan, the injured cyclist. Further misinformation included the sighting of a lightship floating at the mercy of the tide near Ballycotton,

to the east of Cork Harbour, which may have raised hopes for some, particularly the wife of Laurence Furlong, who refused to accept for a long time that her husband was gone.

A rather curious 'pictorial memorial' to six of the crew of the Puffin that appeared in the Weekly Cork Examiner *of 19th December 1896. They are, from top, clockwise, Robert Higginbotham, Joseph Daly, Patrick Hourigan, Laurence Furlong, Richard Dobson and Michael Noonan. The paper explained they were unable to obtain photographs of Messrs. Morgan and Supple. (Photograph courtesy Sarah Thomas)*

Another report placed the missing ship at Tramore, which was quickly found to be erroneous. The Captain of the Cunard liner *Majestic* arrived at Queenstown and reported seeing a lot of timber in the water at the approaches to the harbour but

later a Norwegian steamer arrived, reporting that much of her deck cargo of wood had been washed overboard.

On the Saturday, the steam tug, *Flying Scotsman*, left Queenstown, accompanied by a five-oared whaleboat to conduct a sweep of the area at low tide. On board the former were two members of the Irish Lights Board and two of Robert Higginbotham's brothers.

At the same time, news came in from Youghal to say that two oars with the words *'Daunt's Rock Lightship'* burned onto them had washed up near Heerick Head. This news led to more optimistic speculation that the *Puffin* could have drifted between shipping channels where she might not be seen for many days. The fact that the ship had 700 gallons of oil on board and no oil had yet been seen further protracted the feeling of hopefulness for some.

The same day, the lightship *Guillemot*, having undergone repairs and been towed down from Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire), was placed on her old position on the Daunt Rock.

Sweeping continued all the following week without success. Initially, members of the press had been allowed to accompany the tug but this was quickly rescinded on orders from Irish Lights headquarters. Consequentially, newspaper reports from the middle of the week began to question the methodology of the Irish Lights operation and reported on the '*general indignation'* that no results had been forthcoming. They also questioned why local diver Harry Ensor's offer to supply two experienced salvage crews had not been taken up. Crowds watched the sweeping operations from the nearby cliffs at Weavers Point and held their breath whenever there seemed to be some pausing of operations at a certain spot.

After a week, all hope had gone and most people regarded the operation not as a rescue but as one to locate the boat and find the bodies. And then the weather, which had been relatively placid since the night of the storm, turned again and a large swell caused sweeping and sounding operations to be put on hold. Buoys had been placed to mark the areas of sea that had been already swept and these did not change when the weather did.

Eventually, on Tuesday 20th October, twelve full days after the sinking of the Puffin, the grappling from the Irish Lights tender *Moya* became hooked in fourteen fathoms of water. At low tide, a diver was sent down and he found that it had become stuck in the Puffin's massive cable. A chain was attached to the cable and attempts were made to winch the chain up but were unsuccessful. Plans were made that, the following day, the chain would be followed and the missing boat would be discovered.

And, of course, the weather worsened. Diving was impossible in the conditions and day after day passed in utter frustration. Eventually, after a week of kicking their heels, the diving team got down to investigate. The cable was cut, the loose end hauled aboard the *Moya* and the other end was attached to a buoy.

On Wednesday 28th October, winching operations recommenced and grapplings were dropped in the direction that the cable was heading underwater. Finally, one struck something solid and Harry Ensor immediately donned his diving suit and descended into the water. After fifteen minutes, he re-emerged to say the *Puffin* was lying upright on its keel. Visibility had been bad and he could not make out much of

the damage but at least the boat had finally been found, to the east of her station and in around fifteen fathoms of water.

Further dives were carried out over the next few days and more particulars came to light. The deckhouse of the Puffin, apart from its front section, had been almost completely carried away, while the main mast, which carried the day-marker and the lantern, had been uprooted from its position and was lying over the port side, held in place only by the rigging. The bulwark planks on both sides of the vessel were gone, as were the two boats and the decking around the main mast. The companion hatch and the hatch inside the remains of the deckhouse were both choked with timber, so it was impossible to enter and see if any bodies were down in the hold. As it happened, none of the bodies were ever recovered.

An inquest into the disaster was held in March 1897. Captain Doyle, the master, under oath, declared that the *Puffin* was the finest and the driest ship he had ever served on. Other witnesses contradicted this, saying that she made ten inches a day. Thomas Morgan, brother of the mate, James Morgan, said that, in September, his brother had told him that the recent repairs to the *Puffin* had ruined the ship, adding that "*the first gale those of us on board experience will be our last."* The inquest was adjourned until such time as a proper investigation of the vessel could be carried out.

By early June 1897, the *Puffin* still lay on the seabed where she had foundered at her moorings. The firm of Thomas Ensor and Sons was charged with raising her to the surface and towing her to port where a full examination of the vessel could take place. This was a big job and they hired professional divers to come and help. One of these was Harry Jutson, from Ramsgate in Kent. 52 years old, Harry arrived in Queenstown on 30th May.

On Saturday 5th June, Harry and the diver who found the cable, Patrick Collins, did three dives to try and attach steel shackles around the ship prior to hauling it up. After the third dive, they called it a day and were rowed from the lighter to the nearby tug in a small punt, during which time Harry complained of a headache. On reaching the tug, he put one hand on the rail but immediately fell back into the punt. He was taken unconscious on board the tug where he died a few minutes later. The inquest held three days later delivered the catch-all verdict of apoplexy. In this manner did Harry Jutson become the ninth victim of the *Puffin* disaster.

Eventually, the lightship was towed into shallower water nearer Roches Point, where the divers were better able to work on her. And then, on Thursday 12th August 1897, over ten months after she went down, the *Puffin* was towed into Queenstown Harbour and deposited on a mudbank at Rushbrook, where a proper inspection could be carried out.

The Board of Trade inquiry, which had been adjourned in March, resumed in Dublin in August and basically determined that the ship had foundered at her moorings, due to the steel mast shearing off below the decks and causing a gaping hole through which the water poured. The mast, which supported the lantern and daymark, had a doorway at deck level for the lamplighters to access the lantern from inside the mast and the inquiry judged the steel around the doorway was not sufficiently thick. The inquiry made no judgment as to whether the damage to the mast was caused by a collision or by extreme weather.

As the same sort of mast was being used on both the *Cormorant* and *Torch* lightships, the Commissioners contacted Trinity House to enquire what their next steps should be. There is no indication that any response was ever received.

The following anonymous poem was published in the *Evening Herald* of 16th January 1897: -

The land and the sea were in wildest commotion
when the Puffin's *brave crew were engulfed in the ocean.*
But no sound could be heard from the lightship's deep bell
although tolled by the waves for the dead seamen's knell;
But that bell still appeals for the orphans and wives
of the guardians who died to save other men's lives;
and tho' all unhonoured by tomb or cremation,
they have left us their heirs as the heirs of the nation.

The remains of the Puffin *beached at Rushbrook (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)*

Sources:
Evening Herald 8th October 1896 and others
Irish Examiner and others 10th October 1896 and many others
Kerry Weekly Reporter 7th November 1896
Skibbereen Eagle 12th June 1897
Anne Dooris, family of Robert Higginbotham

Frank Cooper, Haulbowline

From the Newry Telegraph, Thursday 14th January 1897: -

Sad death in Carlingford Bar Lighthouse – A sad death took place on Sunday last in the lighthouse at the entrance to Carlingford Lough. It appears that Mr. Frank Cooper, one of the light-keepers, was on duty with Mr. Widdicomb, the principal light-keeper, when he complained of a pain at his heart. Mr. Widdicomb gave him some peppermint drops which he thought relieved him, and Mr. Cooper then proceeded to the lantern. He again complained of the pain and said it had gone to his arms and Mr. Widdicomb, observing by his appearance that he was seriously ill, stepped outside to ring the alarm bell, but before he could do this, Mr. Cooper said, "It has gone to my head" and, falling back, expired in his colleague's arms. Mr. Widdicomb then rang the bell and Mr. Hugh Rodgers, bar pilot, and his crew, put off in a boat and, on proceeding to the lighthouse, which is about a mile from the mainland at 11.30pm, found that no help was of any avail.

An inquest was held on Tuesday and a verdict was returned to the effect that Mr. Cooper's death was due to the bursting of a blood-vessel. Mr. Cooper had been eleven years at Cranfield and had about thirty years' service in the Irish Lights department. There were universal expressions of regret at his tragic end and much sorrow has been expressed for his wife and family.

Francis Cooper had been born on Skellig Michael in 1843, the son of a coastguard. In 1864, while a lightkeeper at Wicklow Head, he had married one Lucinda Tyrrell, daughter of another keeper, Peter Tyrrell. After five children, Lucinda died at Hook Head lighthouse in 1882. Thirteen years later in 1895, Frank married Margaret Nixon, daughter of a local farmer.

He had been known for his kind and genial disposition and was well-known and well-liked in Kilkeel. The funeral, by all accounts, was a very large one.

The *Newry Telegraph*, two days prior to the report above, had written a stirring account of the bar-pilot's crew's gallant rescue in extremely heavy seas of a man named Cooper at Carlingford bar, who would surely have drowned but for their gallantry. On noticing distress signals from the lighthouse, they had plucked him from the jaws of death and safely delivered him to the lighthouse.

This, they later stated, was due to incorrect information received and apologised for the distress caused to all concerned.

It is hoped that Richard Widdicombe (probably the correct spelling) underwent a refresher course on the use of peppermint drops in cases of heart trauma. A county Down man, he was younger than his unfortunate assistant and was transferred to Dundalk Pile Light soon afterwards. He died in Rathmines, Dublin, in 1934 aged 88.

Francis (Frank) Maguire, Fanad Head

Fanad lighthouse is rightly heralded as being situated in one of the most spectacular positions on the coastline and the sea lashing the rocks on any of the three sides makes it a photographer's dream.

Like many lighthouses around our coast, its establishment was only sanctioned after a fearful tragedy when, in 1812, *H.M.S. Saldanah* ran aground on the treacherous rocks at Fannet Point (as it was then called) with the loss of over 250 lives. The only survivor was the ship's parrot whose relief was short-lived as it was subsequently shot by a terrified local farmer, according to folklore.

The light was first established on St. Patrick's Day 1817 and was very similar to those at Roches' Point and Mutton Island, constructed at the same time. In 1876, a clamour to improve the lighting at the entrance to Lough Swilly resulted in the old tower being replaced by a new, higher one and the complement of dwelling houses was increased.

Ned McKinley's cottage in 1900, more recently the lifelong home of lighthouse attendant Eamon McAteer. Note the fence guarding the cliff edge. (Photograph courtesy of Richard Cummins)

The principal keeper as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, was one Frank Maguire, 45 years old and a native of Dalkey co. Dublin. With his wife and six of his seven children (the youngest of which was two years old), he lived in one of the dwellings and had an office just at the entrance to the tower. One of his children, also Francis, was destined to become a lighthouse keeper too.

One of the duties of the principal keeper was to travel with the contractor the fifteen miles to the village of Kerrykeel in order to cash the monthly paying order from Irish Lights for wages and expenses and to stock up on provisions for the month following. And so, at 8am on 2nd February 1900, Frank walked the 400 yards across the top of the cliffs to Ned McKinley's house. The morning was very cold with a blustery wind threatening to become a gale.

The two men in the horse and cart reached Kerrykeel and visited Mr. Watter's shop, where the £11 6s 11d paying order was cashed and the provisions bought for the next month. The business done, the provisions were loaded up on the cart and the two men retired to a public house for a drink or two.

They left Kerrykeel at around 4pm and arrived back at Ned's house around 9.30pm. The track to Ned's house didn't go past the lighthouse so Frank said goodbye to Ned, who promised to bring the provisions around the following morning. Frank then set off back along the cliff top path towards the lighthouse. He "*had a little drink taken but was well able to look after himself,"* Ned said later.

By 11.30 that night, Mary Maguire, sitting in her house, could bear it no more. She went out in the howling gale and walked the 400 yards to Ned's cottage, a very risky journey in the light of what had just happened. On learning from Ned that Frank had left two hours previously, the realisation sank in that something was seriously wrong. With the help of a few neighbours, Ned and Mary retraced the path to the lighthouse in the ever-increasing gale and darkness with no clue as to what had happened to Frank.

It was only on the following morning that Frank's cap and handkerchief were discovered in a cave near the lighthouse and Mary's worst fears were confirmed. The cave was dredged with grappling irons but no trace of the body was found.

On 8th February, some human remains were discovered. Three days later, a headless corpse with one arm missing was seen in the creek by the lighthouse but the heavy swell prevented its recovery and it was soon lost forever.

As for Mary, she returned to her widowed mother at Ouig, Rathlin Island with her children. Her brother, Neal M'Cuaig had taken over the running of the first island pub when her father died – it was located in part of the farmhouse - and the family supplemented this income with a bit of farming. Mary had met Frank when he had been stationed at the East lighthouse (at that time, the only lighthouse) on the island. They had married in 1878.

To add to Mary's woes, an apologetic but broke assistant keeper was looking for his monthly salary and eventually an agreement was worked out with Irish Lights that the wages should come out of Frank's estate.

Mary ended up marrying Neil Beg McCurdy from Knockans, Rathlin Island in September 1902 and opened a small shop. Four of her children remained on Rathlin.

Sources:

Frank Maguire *Tragedy at Fanad Head - Beam Magazine No.26 1996*
Nicky Sebastian *Rathlin Island Cemetery – An account of those buried here*

(For some strange reason, I could find absolutely nothing in contemporary newspapers about the tragedy, so I am eternally grateful to Frank Maguire for the beautifully-written account of his great-uncle's death in *Beam 26*.)

Robert Moore, Belfast Lough

Railway poster, featuring the lighthouse and a peaceful Belfast Lough

On Sunday 31st March 1901, 48-year-old Robert Moore completed the census return for himself and his wife Margaret at their house in 55, Mervue Street, Belfast. They were a Presbyterian couple in a largely Presbyterian area.

It is likely that Robert hesitated slightly before putting down his occupation as 'Sea man.' He was due to start a new job the following week as lightkeeper of the No.1 Lighthouse in Belfast Lough. But that would not accurately reflect his position on census night. Perhaps he wondered if he would still be a 'Lightkeeper' in ten years' time. He would be 58 years old by then.

He glanced over at his wife. She'd not been very well of late. He smiled and wrote down her place of birth on the census as '*Ocean born*.' They'd think she was a mermaid but that wasn't his problem.

No.1 Lighthouse was also called the Outer Lighthouse or the Belfast Lough Lighthouse. It was a large pile light marking a sandbank at the entrance to Belfast's relatively new port facility and it also acted as a pilot station. It was the second pile light on that spot. The first had been built by Alexander Mitchell in 1844 using his new screw-pile technique that he had discovered not a half a mile from the light by rowing out a short way from Holywood and screwing a pole into the mud, returning the following day to find that it had not budged.

The light had lasted until 1888 when it had been destroyed by *The Earl of Ulster*, not a rampaging member of the aristocracy, but a paddle-steamer ferry on her regular run from Fleetwood. The accident coincided with the end of a huge project to straighten the harbour and the other pile lights were slowly being replaced, so it probably saved the Harbour Board a job.

So, as has been previously stated, in 1891, four new pile lights were erected in the new port, imaginatively called Nos. 1, 2, 3and 4. No. 2 was run into and sunk in 1892 killing James Cooke and his son, Ernest (*see page 101*.) No.3 lasted until 1897, when it too was knocked off its legs, the keeper and his wife narrowly avoiding being killed. In 1898, the harbour authorities decide to pre-empt the trend and took No.4 down themselves.

But to get back to Robert. Sadly, his tenure as a lightkeeper lasted but a week.

On Friday 12th April, '*a woman named Nimick*' and some companions were gathering shellfish on the banks of the lough at Holywood, just across from the Kinnegar Rifle Range, at a place called Knocknagroney. Looking up, she spotted the dead body of a man on the banks and, near it, part of a lug sail. With the tide coming in, she called on her friends to help to drag the body up onto the bank and then ran off to fetch the authorities.

She arrived back shortly afterwards with Sergeant Samuel Donaldson of Holywood who proceeded to examine the body. The dead man was wearing navy trousers, a grey shirt, a jersey and a coat. There were no boots or socks on his feet. The sum of 1s 6d in silver and a few coppers were found in his pockets, together with a lightkeeper's time book. The body was then removed to the morgue.

At roughly eight o'clock that evening, Margaret Moore called to the Holywood Police Barracks, from where she was escorted to the morgue by Sergeant Donaldson and Constable Dinsmore. She identified her husband and '*the grief of the poor woman was pitiable to witness.*' She had not been well, she said, and her husband had sailed across to visit her on the Thursday before returning to the lighthouse in the late afternoon. Only he never made it.

It was assumed that the boat overturned on the journey back to the lighthouse. The newly appointed lightkeeper, realising he was in trouble, quickly removed his boots and socks but to no avail.

The inquest, at three o'clock the following day, determined that the body had been in the water for roughly seventeen hours before it was found at Knocknagroney. A verdict of accidental drowning was recorded. His occupation on his death cert was '*Seaman*.' It should really have read '*Lightkeeper*.'

Robert was buried in the huge sprawling City Cemetery off the Falls Road on the following Monday. His wife, Margaret, joined him there on the 7th April 1922.

Sources:

Belfast Newsletter 13th April 1901

John Potter, East Maiden

Like many first generation lightkeepers, John Richard Potter was the son of a coastguard. He was born in north county Wexford around 1860 and, by the time he married Rachel Copeland – daughter of a farmer in the Gorey / Enniscorthy area – in 1886, he was resident at the lightkeepers' lodgings on Dursey Sound in county Cork. His sphere of responsibility here would have been the temporary light erected on the far end of Dursey Island, a spare lightship's lantern stuck through the middle of a three-roomed wooden house.

We can trace the Potters' postings through the birth of their children – Charlotte was born in 1887 at Dursey Sound; John jnr was born in Wexford in 1889, though the birth cert says his father was at the Baily lighthouse in Dublin; Thomas was born in 1891 at the Old Head of Kinsale; both George (1893) and Fergus (1896) were born when John was on the Tuskar Rock; and Douglas was born in 1901 in Larne.

Larne was, of course, the shore station for The Maidens, a strange pair of lighthouses passed by the ferry between Larne and Stranraer in Scotland. They stand on two rocks half a mile apart. The tower on the northern rock was known as the West Tower, while the south rock tower was known as The East Tower. If that is too straightforward, the rocks are also known as the Hulin Rocks.

The two lighthouses were first exhibited together in 1829 but, around the turn of the twentieth century, there was a growing feeling that one of the towers was superfluous and that an increase in the light of one would negate the need for the other. There was talk of a lightship replacing one of the towers but that never came to pass. In March 1903, the North (West) Tower was discontinued and the East Maidens Lighthouse became simply 'The Maidens.'

For some reason, a posting to the Maidens was, in the earlier years at least, always viewed with a certain lack of enthusiasm, though many keepers found it hard to put their finger on the reason why. Perhaps it was the lack of space, particularly at high tide.

A year before the West Light was discontinued, the principal keeper on the East Light was 41-year-old John Potter (his headstone says he was 39). The shifts were four weeks on, two weeks off and, on Tuesday April 1st 1902, John said goodbye to his wife and children at their home at 23, Bay Road, Larne and set off in the small tender back to the lighthouse. (New keepers' dwellings would be constructed at Ferris Point in the next year or so.)

He had had a slight headache during his time onshore but, meeting up with the assistant keeper, Alfred John Scott, he appeared to be in his normal good health.

On Friday 4th April, he took no dinner at all. He had been on the midnight to sunrise shift and seemed withdrawn and wanting to be left alone. According to Scott, he had in his possession a telescope and seemed to spend a lot of the time looking towards the mainland.

The following morning, John Potter again had a headache. He breakfasted at around 9.30am and then went outside for some air. At around 11.30, James Moorehead, a local fisherman from Larne, pulled up at the small landing place with an official letter and a parcel which Potter brought inside, reading out the contents to Scott. According to Moorehead, the principal keeper, at this time, seemed to be perfectly healthy.

About thirty minutes later, after having gone back out into the yard, he came back in, complained of feeling very ill and went to his room to lie down. At 1.30pm, Scott called him for his dinner and, after about ten minutes, he came out.

The Maidens lighouses
Photo: KyleH via CC BY 3.0

The West Maiden (left, disused) and the still active East Maiden lighthouses today

He did not have any dinner, however, but asked for a cup of tea. He also complained that he was feeling cold, although it was not a cold day. He said he was going to sit down at the fire and, as Scott was in the act of filling the kettle, he fell off the chair over Scott's left knee.

Scott, believing that Potter had fainted, laid him out on the floor and tried to revive him by bathing his temples and head with water. As he showed no signs of recovering, Scott brought the keeper outside into the yard to avail of some fresh air but he had evidently had some kind of a stroke, for he never regained consciousness.

Scott hoisted a signal and James Moorehead who, by this time, was over at the West Maidens lighthouse, came over to see what was wrong. By the time he arrived, the principal keeper was dead. Scott recounted what had happened and bade the skipper to take a message to Larne. This he did but not before leaving one of the men at the lighthouse to assist in whatever way he could.

Dr. James Adrain arrived around 9.45pm, in the company of Constable Rourke and Sergeant Torrance. John Potter was lying on the bed, fully clothed bar his cap and shoes and the body was still warm, despite having been dead for eight hours. The doctor made a complete external examination and found no marks on the body. Nor did he find anything in the room that might have caused the sudden death. He had known the lightkeeper but had never had cause to prescribe for him and diagnosed the cause of death as cerebral apoplexy.

With the help of the policemen, the doctor coffined the body and they then brought it back to Larne. He was interred in McGarel Cemetery in the town.

Sources:
Belfast Newsletter 8th April 1902
Northern Whig 8th April 1902
Larne Times 12th April 1902

William Duff, Kish Lightship

The first lightship in Ireland, and the second in the world, was Palmer's lightship, which marked the end of the Great South Wall in Dublin from 1736 to the establishment of the iconic Poolbeg lighthouse in 1768. Named after the owner of the boat, it was a converted shipping smack which showed three lights from the main mast.

Lightships were generally used to mark places where it was impractical to build a lighthouse, generally on sandbanks without firm foundations. One such sandbank was the Kish Bank, about seven miles out in Dublin Bay. A lightship (the *Richmond*) was established here in 1810, still, at this stage, a converted shipping smack. By all accounts, these engineless hulks rolled around at the mercy of the waves and were a living hell for the crew, who had little shelter from the elements. Occasionally, in really bad weather, the ship would break her moorings and drift at the mercy of the tide, a dangerous time for both crew and other shipping.

But, despite the terrible conditions, men tended to stay on the lightships, sometimes for all their working lives. Each ship had two crews, who had equal time on and off the boat, though time ashore, in the early days especially, meant doing a tour of duty in the buoy depot or provision stores.

Alexander Mitchell's pile lights provided an alternative to lightships, though an attempt to install one at the Kish Bank in 1844 proved unsuccessful, when a sudden storm sent it packing before the piles had been fully installed. In fact, it was not until the 1960s that the Kish lightship was replaced by a state-of the art lighthouse assembled in Dun Laoghaire and towed out to position.

But back to 1902 and the Kish lightship gained headlines worldwide when, on 8th September of that year, she was sunk by the Royal Mail Steamer *Leinster* in dense fog. Neither party saw the other until a coming-together was unavoidable and the lightship – *The Albatross* – was practically split in two by the force of the collision.

The seven men aboard the stricken lightship – William Daly (Master), seamen William Duff, Patrick Langan, Michael Crowe, George Warren and Joseph Pluck and the carpenter, John Day – had been on board about a week and calmly and quickly lowered the lifeboat and rowed away. They were picked up by the *Leinster* and brought to Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire), seemingly none the worse for their experience. The lightship sank within minutes. It was eventually salvaged and sold off.

One of the rescued men was 50-year-old William Duff. He lived in 4, Northumberland Place, Kingstown and his main role on board the lightship – now the *Shearwater,* as the *Albatross* was otherwise engaged on the sea-bed – was as a lamp trimmer. He had been on the *Kish* for twenty years.

The *Shearwater* was a relatively new addition to the fleet having been built in 1894 at a cost of £3,900.

According to his wife, Margaret, William's nerves had got the better of him since the contretemps with the *Leinster*. He had told her that he never would get the better of the shock, although on Sunday morning 12th October, he seemed to be in perfect health as he left Kingstown to rejoin the lightship. He and the rest of his shift had actually been due to relieve the other crew on the Saturday but the weather had been too bad.

An old Kish lightship, possibly the Cormorant. *All Irish lightships were painted black until red became the colour* du jour *in 1955. English lightships were always red.*

His shipmate, Michael Crowe, who had also been on the *Albatross* agreed that William appeared to be in very good health on that Sunday and certainly made no reference to anything ailing him. The two men were winding up the weights of the revolving light at around 9.45pm when suddenly William cried out and fell down dead. Michael called the officer in charge and the two men attempted resuscitation, to no avail. The body was subsequently brought ashore and taken to St. Michael's Hospital, Kingstown.

A postmortem examination found that the deceased had an enormous enlargement of the liver coupled with 'a flabby heart.' Liver disease was entered as the cause of death.

As for the *R.M.S. Leinster*, she continued to ply her trade between Holyhead and Kingstown until a few short weeks before the Armistice in 1918, when she was sunk by two torpedoes from a German U-boat. There was no passenger list but thanks to the efforts of Philip Lecane, we know that there were 567 named people killed, making it by far Ireland's worst maritime disaster.

The tragedy happened as the *Leinster* was passing the Kish lightship.

Source:
Irish Daily Independent 14th October 1902

James Kavanagh, Fastnet / Crookhaven

The lighthouse at Fastnet is the jewel in the crown of Irish Lights. It was always the most prestigious light for keepers, not necessarily the most popular, but it is said that many keepers were enriched by their time at the tiny rock station.

The rock is small, only 120 yards by 45 yards at low water, rising out of the ocean depths around four miles from the island of Cape Clear off Ireland's south-west tip. At its height, it is roughly 105 feet and it was at this spot that the first Fastnet lighthouse was established in 1854. It was a cast-iron structure and it was soon realised that it would be no match for the North Atlantic at its most violent. The bottom of the tower was reinforced by a cast-iron skirt up to the height of the second floor to try and stop the shaking whenever gales hit. And when, in 1881, the nearby Calf Rock, which was of a similar design, was swept away, from the top of the skirt upwards, in a terrible storm, the writing was on the unstable wall for the old Fastnet.

James Kavanagh at work on the Fastnet (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

With their customary speed and sense of urgency, it only took eighteen years for work on the new lighthouse to begin. Unlike the first lighthouse on the top of the rock, the new tower was built from the bottom of the rock, with arced flanks that would allow the waves to ride up the lighthouse and curl back outwards, rather than allowing the full force of the sea to pound the lighthouse walls. The designer was Irish Lights engineer, William Douglass, and the man who would make it happen was Wicklow man James Kavanagh.

The construction of the lighthouse is one of the greatest feats of engineering this country has ever seen and further reading on the subject is highly recommended. The light was built on the northwest part of the island, where the rock was hardest. The first ten layers of blocks which were cut into the side of the rock were only partial layers, with the natural rock forming a part of the foundations. So low were these layers that the first full layer only began below the high-water mark.

Painting of James Kavanagh in familiar white garb at the Mizen Centre
(Photograph courtesy Sue Hill, Mizen Centre)

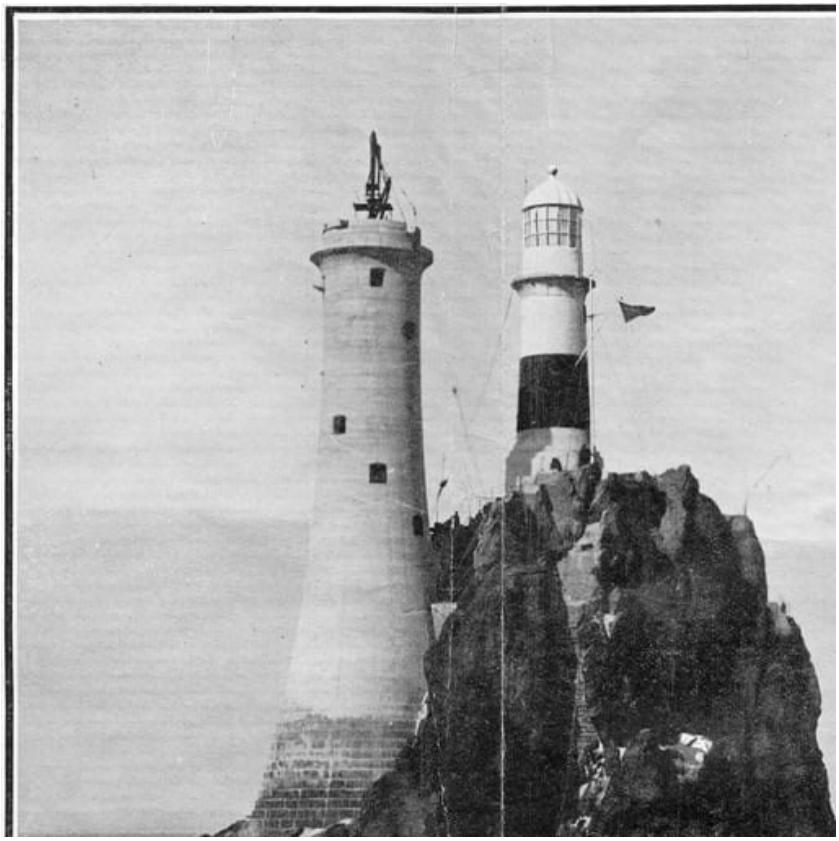
The granite blocks of stone were prepared, cut, assembled, inspected, numbered and disassembled in Penryn in Cornwall before they were transported to Crookhaven, where a new pier was purposely built at the lighthouse station, the nearest harbour to the Fastnet on the mainland. Crookhaven was also known as Rock Island, to confuse it with another lighthouse-bearing Rock Island on the Aran Islands. Every block was cut to dovetail into the ones below, above and on either side, producing a solid wall that would be completely immovable. A new Irish Lights tender, the *Ierne*, was specially commissioned to transport the blocks from Crookhaven to the Fastnet.

Incidentally, Schull had originally been the shore station of choice for the Fastnet but the Harbour Board there were looking for silly money and it worked out far cheaper to build a new pier at Crookhaven.

All in all, 89 layers of stone blocks had to be set in place by hand, comprising 2,074 stones in total, weighing a colossal 4,300 tons. This does not include the 4,500 cubic feet of granite blocks used to fill the foundation and fill the space between the rock and the tower. All to be done at the mercy of the weather. It was a logistical challenge, to say the least.

James Kavanagh was a highly skilled stonemason and foreman who had been employed by Irish Lights for thirteen years when he first set foot on the Fastnet in August 1896. He was 45 years old and he threw himself body and soul into the project. It was said that from that time until his death in 1903, he spent ten to twelve months of the year on the rock, completely unwilling to be away when any work at all was even remotely possible.

The initial work involved cutting a pier in the rock for the landing of supplies, construction of store houses and barracks for the men and the preparation of the rock for the first course of stones. As many as twenty-two men lived on the rock during this initial period, which was reduced by a third when building of the tower commenced. Often two and sometimes three men occupied each bunk.



The new and the old Fastnet lighthouse as they would have looked in 1903
(Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

By all accounts, Kavanagh was a hard taskmaster, though he led by example. Everybody had to rise at 5am and wash out their barracks and scrub themselves thoroughly before the day could begin. The average pay of a labourer was 2s 6d per day with an extra 1s thrown in when working on the rock.

Constantly at the mercy of the tide and the weather, it was incredible that there were only three serious accidents on the Fastnet during Kavanagh's stewardship. Two of his workforce lost an eye and were recompensed to the tune of £45, a sizable sum in those days. One of the riggers also suffered a broken leg. He put in a claim against Irish Lights on the grounds that he was totally and permanently incapacitated and was awarded the huge sum of £350. Imagine the surprise of the men on the rock when their former workmate turned up there as a member of crew of a coal boat!

By August 1899, the partial layers and the foundations were ready to take the first fully circular layer of granite blocks. These were loaded onto the *Ierne* by a special steam crane at Crookhaven and transported out to the Fastnet, where they were winched onto the station.

James Kavanagh, easily recognisable in photographs of the time in his white coat and cap, insisted on personally setting in place every one of the 2,074 stones of the tower. Every layer was measured meticulously by a steel tape and corrections made before being put into place. After the 89th and final layer was laid on 3rd June 1903, a plumb line was dropped from the top of the tower and the difference from the vertical was found to be less than three-sixteenths of an inch.

A temporary light had been placed on the rock a few months earlier and the light of the old lighthouse had been discontinued. The *Ierne* was dispatched to fetch the new lantern and work on the interior progressed in the meantime.

Around a fortnight after setting that final stone in place, James Kavanagh, who had always been a man of strong and robust health, suddenly became unwell. His condition deteriorated and his son, John, who had been working with him, decided he should be brought ashore. He was moved to the dwelling of lightkeeper Edward Rohu in Crookhaven where he received both medical and spiritual attention but cerebral syncope set in and he died on Monday morning 6th July 1903, without ever seeing his beloved lighthouse lit. He was 52 years old and left a wife, Catherine, nee Wall, and eight children, the youngest of whom was barely a year old.

The Irish Lights steamer *Ierne*, such a large part of Kavanagh's last years, brought the body from Crookhaven to Wicklow town the following day, arriving at 7pm. With the ensign at half mast, the steamer dropped anchor near the pier and the coffin was lowered into a skiff, which was then towed by two Irish Lights rowers to the pier. Here it was received by the coastguards who bore the coffin to the family home in the town, accompanied by over a thousand townspeople.

The following day, all business places in the town closed down as a mark of respect as the funeral cortege passed by. He was buried in Threemilewater graveyard.

James' son, John, who had accompanied his father for much of his time on the rock, returned to dismantle the old lighthouse down to the strengthened skirt at the bottom. It was a long and tedious job as the brick and cement had set into a solid mass. Today, the rusty iron stump is all that remains of the old light.

John continued working as a builder / mason for Irish Lights until one day in 1938, aged 56, while working at the Bull Rock lighthouse, he had a sudden attack of

indigestion and died before he could be seen by a doctor, yet another victim of the job. He was buried at Blacksod, county Mayo, where he had lived with his wife.

Today, the Fastnet lighthouse beam still swings around in a joyous circle, a shining testament to all who worked on her.

The Kavanagh headstone at Threemilewater
(photograph courtesy Brendan Conway)

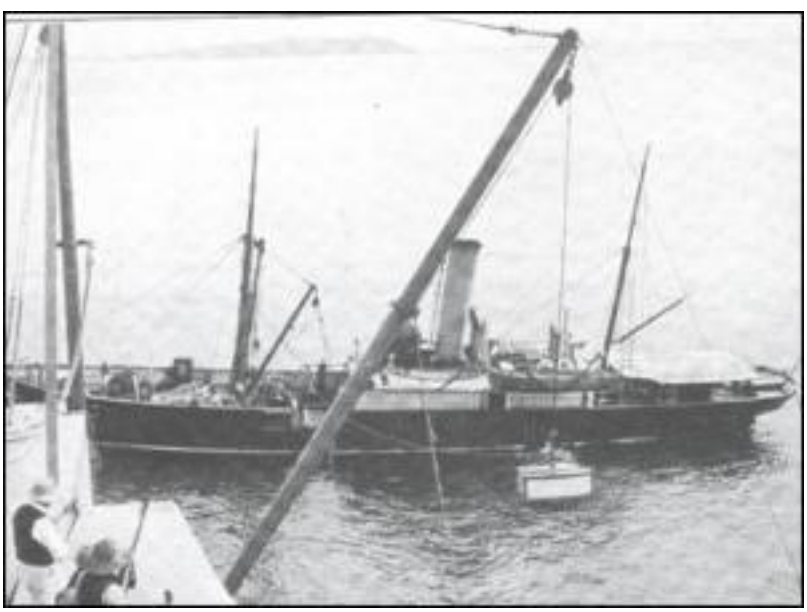
Sources:
Wicklow Newsletter 11th July 1903
Wicklow People 25th June 1938
Southern Star 5th July 2003
Irish Independent 31st December 2005
The History of the Fastnet by James Morrissey

Thomas Kearney, the *Ierne*

As we saw in the last chapter, such was the scale of work in the construction of the new Fastnet lighthouse, that a brand-new Irish Lights tender was commissioned to transport all the men, supplies and building materials from Crookhaven on the mainland to the tiny rock seven miles out in the Atlantic Ocean.

This tender was the steamship, *Ierne,* the first of that name in the service of Irish Lights and occasionally referred to as the *Irene* in British papers. It was a steel screw steamer built by Blackwood and Gordon in Port Glasgow, official number 108819. It had a registered tonnage of 213 tons and was 126 feet long. Technically belonging to Trinity House in London, she flew the British flag, like all Irish Lights tenders and lightships. She launched on 15th October 1898.

From then until 1904, when the Fastnet was completed, *Ierne* was the workhorse of the operation. Winter months were chalked off as being too bad to work but for nine months every year, the new steamer carried materials and people back and forth to the rock until finally, the new tower was up and the old one had been dismantled down to the stump.



The ILT Ierne *at the Fastnet (Photograph courtesy Sue Hill, Mizen Centre)*

After completion of the Fastnet, the *Ierne* was put into general service. Two other tenders, *Princess Alexandra* (1863-1904) and *Moya* (1893-1905) were retired but *Tearaght* (1893) and the new *Alexandra* (1904) gave the company a total of three tenders to service all the lighthouses and buoys around the country. *Ierne* was given the south-west coast as her sphere of responsibility. Many of her crew were comprised of local men from the Castletownbere area.

It was in late 1905, about a year after the completion of the Fastnet, that Thomas Kearney of Castletown – a breeding ground for many lightkeepers and Irish Lights mariners – joined the crew of the *Ierne* as the ship's carpenter. As the sole provider for his parents and family, who lived at Rock, West End in Castletown, the job was a

very welcome one, bringing with it a degree of reliability not found among the general sea-faring community. Unfortunately, it proved to be a very short tour of duty.

On the morning of Thursday January 11th 1906, the steamer set out from Castletown to land supplies and relief keepers on the Bull Rock, one of the more isolated and dangerous islands off the western coast. The Bull had been established after the nearby Calf Rock had been washed away in a terrible storm in 1881 – amazingly with no loss of life – and the whole area, together with the Wolf Rock and Scilly lights off the coast of Cornwall, was known to be subject to some of the worst weather ever seen in the British Isles. Giant waves build up a head of steam in their 4,000-mile sweep across the North Atlantic Ocean and encounter no obstacle until they smash up against the outlying islands off our coast.

Due to this, reliefs on the Bull Rock were not always possible and often had to be aborted, sometimes for several weeks, even months, until the weather relented.

By 10am, the *Ierne,* with her seventeen-strong crew and relief keepers, was just coming around Crow Head, the furthest point of the Beara peninsula. To their right, the long sleeping stegosaurus of Dursey Island would slowly be revealed. Off Dursey Head, the pathetic stump of the Calf Rock lighthouse served as a potent reminder of the power and fury of nature in this part of the world. Their destination, the Bull Rock, would not yet have come into view.

Route of the Ierne *(image courtesy Mapcarta)*

The southerly wind was freshening and squally and five men were on deck. Captain Kearon and the mate, Mr. Wheatcroft, were on the bridge, with a seaman named Shanahan at the wheel, while deckhand Cornelius McGrath and newly installed ship's carpenter, Thomas Kearney, were on the starboard side near the lifeboat. The moorings had come loose on the lifeboat and the captain had told Tom to fix them.

Suddenly, among the mountainous waves, Captain Kearon saw, to his horror, one incredibly massive tidal wave – a giant among giants – bearing down on the small boat at incredible speed.

"*All hands look out and hold on!*" yelled the captain but barely were the words out of his mouth when the wave hit. Every man desperately clung to the nearest object available as the ship was completely swamped in the deluge.

On deck all was carnage, as the boat was thrown on her beam end. The main lifeboat and two smaller boats were stove in and thrown overboard. Captain Kearon was swept off his feet on the bridge and only managed to save himself by clinging desperately to a rope. Cornelius McGrath was hurled violently against the lifeboat, sustaining three broken ribs and a severe case of concussion. He would undoubtedly have been swept into the raging ocean but his foot got caught in a smokestack stay (one of the wires attached to the funnel that helps to stabilise the funnel in stormy weather), which somehow he clung onto until the wave passed and he was able to regain secure footing.

Once the immediate danger had subsided, he looked around for his companion but of Thomas Kearney, there was no sign. He immediately raised the alarm. The captain and mate on the bridge later said they had seen him heading for the lifeboat for shelter. When the wave struck, the lashings at the stern of the boat gave way, causing the boat to tip and bring the unfortunate young carpenter with it, headlong into the ocean, causing him severe injury as it did so.

On realising what had happened, the boat immediately put about and turned back to where Kearney was floundering in the billowing sea, surrounded by the debris of broken boats and anything else that hadn't been lashed to the deck of the *Ierne*. He was clinging desperately to an oar from the lifeboat. The men threw lifebuoys and other oars out to him and he managed to reach a lifebuoy

The boat steered to the ocean side of the drowning man to protect him slightly from the excesses of the tempestuous weather but, in the absence of any serviceable boats left aboard, the crew was unable to actually rescue him. Ropes were thrown, to no avail. Suddenly, Tom released his hold on the oar and the lifebuoy, threw his arms above his head and sank smoothly down beneath the waves. The whole incident had taken no more than three minutes. His body was never recovered.

Helpless, the crew of the *Ierne*, most of them dazed from the wave-strike, remained at the scene for a considerable time, hoping that the body might resurface and somehow be recovered. Michael O'Sullivan, a foreman, was also badly injured with a rupture and abdominal injuries. John Murphy, seaman, had a dislocated knee. Another seaman, Patrick Crook, suffered internal injuries. These were all treated at the scene.

There was nothing that the rest of the crew could do but it would have seemed indecent to leave so soon. Eventually, the captain gave the order to turn about and the pulverised steamer slowly limped back into Castletown, where the sad news was conveyed to the shocked town and where the injured men could get proper treatment.

Two weeks later, it was reported that a large public meeting had been organised in Castletown to address the financial distress caused to Thomas Kearney's family through his unfortunate demise. The crowd was informed that the deceased was a few weeks short of the length of service required to qualify for relief from the Irish Lights Seamen's insurance fund. However, the writer went on to say, doubtless with a knowledge of previous Irish Lights compensation cases, that *"it is confidently expected that the Irish Lights Board, taking into account the circumstances of the*

accident, the exemplary character of the deceased, and the dire distress of the family, will allow full financial compensation to those who depended on him for their means of support; and that the Board will act generously in the matter and not attempt to evade what is undoubtedly their certain moral responsibility by endeavouring to put forward a mere technicality on the score of incomplete service." It is not known if the Board were guilted into paying compensation or not, though it is likely that Trinity House would have vetoed any proposed payment.

As is often the case in communities that suffer loss, a local balladeer composed a song to commemorate the life of Tom Kearney (or Carney, as it is written): -

Oh Bantry Bay, oh Bantry Bay, how beautiful to view
your lovely scene and islands green, your waters dark and blue.
Of all the scenes I can redeem, the scenes of broken heart,
for Tom Carney is your victim now and here I'll tell it short.

This young man was a carpenter, enjoying a lovely trade.
On board the Ierne*, they hired him for the same.*
But little was his notion that he would coldly rest
from Crow's Head to the rugged shore of Dursey in the west.

He met a sad, untimely death at the age of twenty-three.
He was as nice a young man as your eyes could ever see.
He never bore the widow's curse or the orphan's lonely wail,
so why was he sentenced as a sinner in despair?

When the vessel at the mooring lay, oh, who shall break the news?
The people all around, they gathered into groups.
The maidens of the town were neither proud nor shy,
for it's here and there you'd hear a prayer and here and there a cry.

His saws and planes with cobwebs stains that once were bright and clean.
Now come the summer evenings and once more the fields are green.
The merry dance along the roads, the football in the fields.
Oh, who is she on yonder rock who hid your love from view?

The *Ierne* was refitted and served the lighthouses of the Fastnet, Roancarrig, Skellig Michael, Bull Rock and Inishtearaght until 1921. Her successors, the *Deirdre, Nabro* and *Valonia*, were manned by the sons and grandsons of the crew of the *Ierne*, which continued to ply her trade around the coasts of Ireland until 13th January 1954, when the shipbreakers finally got a hold of her.

Sources:
Evening Echo and *Irish Independent* 12th January 1906
Skibbereen Eagle 13th January 1906
Southern Star 27th January 1906
Belfast Newsletter 7th July 1930
Southern Star 17th September 2005

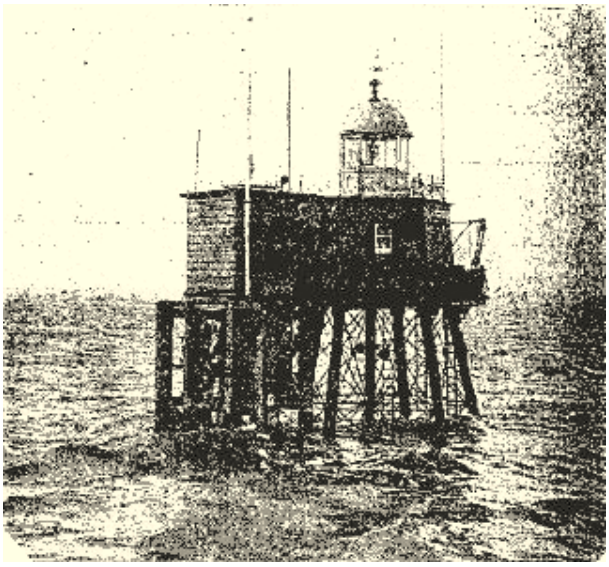
David Kennedy, Belfast Lough

LIGHTHOUSE TRAGEDY.

Drowned Within Sight of His Companion.

Newspaper headline of the time

Thomas Rew, the principal keeper of No.1 Lighthouse near the entrance to Belfast Lough, looked out at the weather and grimaced. Not bad weather for sailing, he thought, but it looked ominous for later. Then again, this was Belfast Lough in October. You had to make do. They'd made the Saturday trip into town for provisions in far worse weather.



Belfast Lough No.1 Lighthouse

The only other alternative was to wait for the Harbour Board's launch which, they said, went up and down the lough at least once a day. The problem there was you never knew when they'd be coming. You could be waiting half a day for a lift into town and then they wouldn't be coming back until the following day.

His assistant, David Kennedy, climbed down the ladder of the lighthouse and stepped into the boat. He was fifty-seven years old and had been a lightkeeper at the pile light for three and a half years. He was regarded by his colleagues as reliable, popular and steady. At his home in 8, Hill View, Greencastle, he had a wife and one son, whom he hadn't seen for a while. Just one of the little things that came with the job.

David set off and made Clarendon Dock in good time. He tied up the boat and went into the town to buy provisions for the two men. Meanwhile, as Thomas Rew had feared, the weather turned, and a veritable gale sprang up. Another occupational hazard. Thomas Rew shrugged. His assistant would not be so foolish as to attempt

the journey back in that weather. He resigned himself to a night alone in the lighthouse.

David Kennedy was not a foolish man and he well knew the dangers of Belfast Lough in a gale. The harbour history was littered with drownings. His home in Greencastle, in the northern part of the city, was too far away to be humping all his provisions, particularly as he would have to transport them back in the morning. Accordingly, he knocked on the door of his friend, Thomas Whiteside at his lodging-house at 30, Great Georges Street and stayed with him for the night.

The following morning saw no improvement in the weather. If anything, it was blowing even harder. This would be a waiting game. It was not the first time this had happened and, in the lighthouse, Thomas Rew would not have been alarmed. Sure, wait until Monday, he would have told himself. No panic here.

Suddenly, around mid-afternoon, the weather started to relent. It was still fairly boisterous but, for an experienced seaman like David Kennedy, it was enough. Accompanied by Thomas Whiteside, he returned to Clarendon Dock, loaded all his provisions into the boat, hoisted the sail and cast off. The time was 4pm.

And to be fair to him, he was right. The wind was very strong but he made the lighthouse after two and a half hours. At 6.40pm, Thomas Rew, who was already preparing for another night alone, was surprised to hear a cheery whistle coming from the lough. He ran outside and saw Assistant Keeper Kennedy taking down the sail as he approached the lighthouse, as the wind was full on the stern of the boat. He ran down the steps to help him tie up the boat and help him with the provisions.

The boat bobbed vigorously on the choppy water as it approached the ladder. David Kennedy stood up, rope in hand, ready to tie on when a sudden large wave threw the boat against one of the piles of the lighthouse and knocked the returning lightkeeper into the water. The abrasions on his head suggest that he took a blow from the side of the boat as he fell.

Horrified, Thomas Rew, watched the boat and the unconscious body of his colleague, for whom he had a great regard, float away from the lighthouse. He tried to throw him a line but failed. Racing back up the steps of the ladder, he got his flashlight and urgently signalled to the pilot schooner, *Ross*, which was anchored a short distance away.

The pilot boat came over and eventually located the empty boat. It was of course pitch black by this time. As they tied up the boat, they noticed that some of the ropes were hanging over the side and, when the pilots pulled these in, they found the lifeless body of the lightkeeper entangled in them. Quickly hauling him into the boat, they attempted artificial respiration but with no success. It had been two hours since the body first entered the water.

The body was brought by the pilot boat into Belfast where the Harbour Master was alerted and the police summoned. The remains of David Kennedy were then brought to the Laganbank Mortuary. (Another report states that the body was brought to the lighthouse, where it remained overnight. The following morning, the Harbour Board launch, *Lagan,* proceeded to the lighthouse, flag flying at half mast, and conveyed the body to shore.)

At the inquest on the Tuesday following, at the Old Recorder's Court, Townhall Street, the question of the availability of the Harbour Board's steam launch for transporting lightkeepers to and from shore for provisions and home visits came up.

Thomas Rew, when questioned, stated that the Harbour Board did indeed have a little steam lunch but could not say what it was used for. He added that it was certainly a risky business going for provisions in a flimsy little boat.

It was further determined that there was, in any case, no way for the lighthouse keepers to communicate with the Harbour Board to request the use of the launch.

Representatives for the Harbour Board argued that, if David Kennedy had been standing in a steam launch and the vessel struck one of the piles, he would have been thrown into the water just the same. They also argued that the sailing of this little boat by the keepers had been going on for years *'and no accident of the kind had happened before,'* conveniently forgetting that lightkeeper Robert Moore had lost his life trying to reach the very same lighthouse eight years previously. Basically, it was a freak accident and the man would still be alive if the ropes hadn't somehow tangled around his legs. Mr. Kennedy could easily have waited until the Monday morning and nothing would have been said to him.

For the family, it was stated that they bore no ill-will towards the Harbour Board and were very grateful to the kindness that had been shown to them. Their only point was that it had been a long-running source of irritation not only to the lightkeepers but also the pilots that they had to use flimsy boats for transportation while a much more stable steam launch was lying unused in the harbour. It was agreed that the matter would be brought back to the Harbour Board.

An editorial in the *Belfast Evening Telegraph* lambasted the Harbour Board for their treatment of the pilots and the lightkeepers. Many pilots, they said, were often stranded in the port after bringing in a boat. There was a feeling that the Board could spend millions on new graving docks but the pilots and lightkeepers were still being made to endure hardships and danger both in accommodation and transportation.

At the following meeting of the board, expressions of grief were expressed for the '*unfortunate man Kennedy*.' However, the requisition of the steam launch was a matter for the harbour master and it was their view that the launch could be requisitioned by the harbour master whenever the need arose. To be charitable to them, maybe they had not thought through the logistics of how exactly the pilots and lightkeepers were to make the request.

The Chairman also said that *'he was sorry that any man should have met with sudden death in such an unfortunate a way. He should make it clear, however, that the man was not on harbour duty at the time. He came up on Saturday morning on his own business and should have returned on Saturday evening,'* a statement which, frankly, beggars belief on more than one level.

Sources:
Belfast Newsletter 26th October 1909 and others
Belfast Evening Telegraph 26th October 1909
Belfast Morning News 26th October 1909 and others
Northern Whig 27th October 1909
Kerry Sentinel and others 27th October 1909
Herald and County Down Independent 29th October 1909

Timothy Harrington, Eeragh

The Harringtons are one of the major Irish lighthouse dynasties that seem to permeate every aspect of our maritime history. They were gas-makers, lightkeepers and mariners on board the Irish Lights tenders. Like the Redmonds and the Higginbothams, sons followed fathers into the service and daughters married into other lightkeeping families to a degree rarely seen outside the royal houses of Europe.

The lighthouse at Eeragh (photograph courtesy of Dermot Breen)

John Harrington was a native of Dursey Island, off the Beara peninsula in the south-west corner of Ireland. Born around 1853, he must have watched as a child the erection of the Calf Rock lighthouse, little thinking, perhaps, that he would be at the epicentre of the world's attention when the lighthouse came crashing down in 1881. That there was no loss of life in the incident was quite incredible. Fortunately, none of the keepers – of whom John Harrington was one - or workmen were in the tower at the time of the disaster, although the weather was so bad that they were trapped in a small kitchen up to their knees in water for twelve days until a rescue could be undertaken.

One of John's sons was Timothy (Tim) Harrington who, like his father, was twenty years old when he joined Irish Lights. His first job was a gas-maker, a strenuous

occupation that involved a lot of manual labour. Shortly afterwards, he was promoted to assistant keeper and began his travels around Ireland, to St. John's Point in county Down, to Tory Island, back to Dursey for the Bull Rock and to Roches Point at the mouth of Cork Harbour. On July 16th 1907, he was transferred to Eeragh, aka North Aran, aka Rock Island.

The chain of three main islands known as the Aran Islands in Galway Bay used to be covered by one lighthouse on the highest point of the largest island, Inis Mór. Unfortunately, like so many lights around our coast – The Baily at Howth, Wicklow Head, the Old Head of Kinsale and Cape Clear – it soon became evident that, whereas building at a high elevation meant the light could be seen at a greater distance on a clear night, the frequent low cloud, mists and fogs that plague our coasts often rendered them completely useless. And so, in the case of Inis Mór, George Halpin decided to place one light at the north-western end of the chain, at Eeragh, and one at the south-eastern end, on Inis Oírr.

The lighthouse is actually on the outermost of two smaller islands off the tip of Inis Mór. Today it is white with two black bands but in Tim Harrington's day, the bands were red. Although not much more than a mile from the main island, its position as first landfall for the Atlantic breakers, meant that reliefs were often delayed as often as on more distant lighthouses.

In October 1903 when stationed on the Bull Rock, Timothy had married Annie Griffin in Kilkeel, county Down. The strange life of a lightkeeper's wife would not have been a major culture-shock for Annie – she herself was the daughter of Thomas Griffin, the principal keeper at Haulbowline lighthouse at the entrance to Carlingford Lough. The couple do not appear to have had any children.

At some stage during the summer of 1909, a new principal keeper, Joseph Higginbotham, was transferred to Eeragh. The name Higginbotham is also synonymous with Irish Lights, with many of that name serving as lightkeepers or on the lightships. Joseph, like Tim, had been serving at Roches Point, when he got the call to head to Galway. A Patrick Higginbotham, possibly Joseph's brother, was, around that time, the keeper at Inis Oírr, at the other end of the Aran Islands chain.

Joseph brought with him his new wife, Winifred, daughter of lightkeeper James Friel. She was fourteen years his junior and their first-born, Robert Aiden, was but a few months old. She had returned home to her native Donegal to have the child, like many others not willing to risk the possibility of delivering the baby herself. Unfortunately, he was a weak infant and died when he was only eight months old in October 1909.

Less than a year later, death again struck the barren rock. At 12.45 am on July 17th 1910, PK Joseph Higginbotham was called on by Tim Harrington and told that the latter could not keep his watch, as he was suffering from stomach cramps.

They gave him stimulants and 'policed his stomach,' to use Higginbotham's quaint phrase, which seemed to do the trick. In fact, he seemed quite well and in good spirits. However, at roughly the same time the following morning, the cramps returned with increased severity and this time there was no relieving them. Harrington asked the PK to send out distress signals for medical aid, which he did. He fired some more fifteen minutes later. At sunrise, he lit a third distress flare and then a tar barrel.

At around 5 am, a canoe arrived from the pseudo-mainland but with no medical supplies or personnel, because the doctor was on the middle island of Inis Maan. Higginbotham told the canoeist to fetch a doctor but it was too late. Harrington died at 7.40am. He was 32 years old.

Soon afterwards, a doctor arrived and gave the cause of death as 'gastric inflammation of the stomach.' Higginbotham arranged for a local supernumerary keeper to be installed in Harrington's place and then dashed off a brief note to the Commissioner of Irish Lights informing them of the news.

Timothy Harrington was buried in the Seven Churches Cemetery on Inis Mór, near to the spot where Robert Aiden Higginbotham, Joseph's son, had been buried nine months previously.

Graves of Robert Aiden Higginbotham and Timothy Harrington on Inis Mór

Annie Harrington had to vacate her house on North Aran. She moved back to live with her father at Ardglass lighthouse. It is a sad fact not appreciated by people outside of the lightkeeping community that, due to their nomadic existence, keepers and their families, when transferred, sometimes had to leave a loved one behind. We might visit a grave once a week or once a month but, for the lightkeeper and his wife, serving at stations hundreds of miles away, it could be many years, if at all, that they managed to revisit the last resting place of a child, a wife, or a husband.

Source:
Southern Star 8th October 2005

Thomas Stapleton, Kish Lightship

From the Evening Irish Times 11th January 1911: -

Master of the Kish lightship drowned – On Tuesday evening last, the Master of the Kish Lightship, Thomas Stapleton, was drowned. He had been relieved by the mate, Mr. Crowe, in the morning at the conclusion of his month's stay on board the Kish Lightship. He was taken off by the tending boat, which was manned by Captain Miller and two hands.

Shortly after leaving the lightship, Stapleton put on his overcoat, remarking he would take a turn at the tiller. When near the South Burford Buoy, the boat, which is schooner-rigged, suddenly came up to the wind. The crew's attention was occupied for a minute and, on looking round, Stapleton had disappeared. He was not seen again and no account can be given as to how he fell overboard. It is supposed the tiller ropes slipped and caused the accident.

Stapleton was about 45 years of age. He had been 25 years in the Irish Lights service, and a short time ago was recommended to take charge of the Kish Lightship. He was a native of Dalkey, where his family is much respected. He leaves a widow and seven young children.

Thomas Stapleton had been born in 1859, the son of a lightkeeper, at Wicklow Head. His father, John, had been born in Larne and, as we have seen before, John's professional travels are recorded in the birthplaces of his children – Galway (1856), Wicklow (1859 and 1861), Eeragh (1864), Kilcredaun (1866 and 1869), Valentia (1871), Hook Head (1873) and Clare Island (1876)[4] – despite the fact that he was recorded as a 'Lightshipman' on Thomas' marriage certificate in 1887!

Thomas' wife, Anastasia (nee Kelly) was the daughter of a pilot and she and Thomas lived on the coast near Bullock (or Bulloch) Harbour, Dalkey, at the Pilots Cottages, which are now apartments. It would appear, from the reference to the South Burford Buoy, that the tender had been making for Bullock Harbour at the time of the accident.

Bullock harbour is probably the oldest harbour in Dublin Bay but, due to its natural contours and its tendency to get swamped in heavy seas, it was never going to grow into a major port. At one time, however, it was a base for both the Revenue Commissioners and pilots.

These days it is graced with an ornamental and very pretty blue and white light that once stood on a platform (dolphin) near the Poolbeg Power Station on the Liffey, an example of preserving maritime heritage that should be followed by other bodies around the country.

The lightship that Thomas had lately been appointed the master of was the *Shamrock,* which had been built at the North Wall, Dublin in 1867 by the firm of Walpole, Webb and Bewley, who also built the *Osprey* the following year. She was sold in 1936.

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[4] These are the names of the lighthouse stations, not the children, just in case anybody is confused!

John Fitzgerald, Horse Rock

From the Kerry Weekly Reporter 16th August 1913: -

Sad Drowning Fatality – Tragic Occurrence near Limerick – A sad drowning fatality is reported to have occurred at Ringmoylan, Pallaskenry, County Limerick on Monday evening.

Particulars to hand go to show that on the evening in question, Patrick Fitzgerald, a lighthouse keeper on the River Shannon, left to light his lamps, taking with him, on his journey by boat, his little son aged six years. The father went into the lighthouse and, while he was away, the boy, who remained behind in the boat, accidentally fell into the water and was carried away by the strong current.

A search for the body was made but to no avail. Much sympathy is felt locally for the afflicted parents.

The Horse Rock light c.1905. The figures ascending the light are not S.A.S. but Irish Lights inspectors. (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

One of the least-known lighthouses on our shores, Horse Rock – not to be confused with the beaconed Horse Rock in Courtmacsherry Bay - was erected in September 1870 and was one of a string of beacons designed to light the hitherto dark and treacherous waters of the upper Shannon estuary. Situated on a long east-west reef near the River Fergus, the light was established to point maritime traffic to the south of the reef and out of harm's way. It was a pile light and the only one on the upper Shannon estuary that had living quarters. These quarters consisted of one wooden room with three windows and doubtless was unsuited to feline swinging.

The first keeper to enjoy these luxurious quarters was 'a man named Hickey' from Pallaskenry, which lies on the southern, Limerick shore of the Shannon, even though the lighthouse itself is in county Clare. In 1885, the keeper, Molony, suffered a fall from the balcony of the light and, lying senseless on the rocks as the tide came in, was only saved by a boat that chanced to pass by.

But the family most associated with Horse Rock was the Fitzgerald family. The father, John (1836 – 1918) evidently did a spot of lightkeeping but by the turn of the century, the two sons, Patsy and Bill, had begun to take over.

Patsy, who was a couple of years older, married first and, in July 1907, their first child, John, was born. Although his Christian name is not mentioned in the newspaper article, his age pinpoints that this is the child who drowned that day in 1913. With three other children at home under four years of age, one presumes that Patsy was giving his wife, Margaret a dig out by minding the eldest boy.

Around the time of the John's death, it was decided that Horse Rock should be lit by lamplighters and the post of lightkeeper was made redundant. Bill – commonly called Bill Fitz - gradually took over the lamplighting end of it and was a regular sight sailing his 'gandalow' over to the light and back. This was a flat-bottomed boat ideally suited to negotiating shallows and mudflats.

In the 1950s, the light was also made redundant, by the changing of the correct channel from the south to the north of the reef. Gradually, all the lights became unwatched automatic and the profession of lamplighter came to an end on the Shannon.

Unmanned, unwatched and untended, the lighthouse gradually deteriorated before coming down in Storm Darwin in 2014.

Bill Fitz in the 'gandalow' that he used when lighting Horse Rock. Doubtless the boat in which John Fitzgerald sailed to his death, was something very similar
(Photograph courtesy Paul Fitzgerald)

Source:
Communication with Paul Fitzgerald, descendant

Denis Connolly, Inishtearaght

The island of Inishtearaght (*Inis Tiaracht*) off the coast of Kerry, when viewed from an angle different than from the mainland, is not like a pyramid at all. Somewhat similar to Skellig Michael, it comprises two quite sheer pinnacles, soaring to heights of 349 and 656 feet, joined by a saddle and a comparatively rounded peak of 597 feet. Beneath the saddle, a spectacular sea arch has been cut by the elements.

Work on the lighthouse and keepers' dwellings began at the beginning of 1864 and, after much toil and sweat, the light was exhibited on 1st May 1870. At the same time, the upper light on the Skelligs was discontinued.

Great Blasket Island with Inishtearaght behind right

It is a mystery how the wives of the keepers managed to rear their families in such an inhospitable place. Practically every spot on the rock carried with it a danger of falling and play areas would have been non-existent. Tiny plots of comparatively flat land were cultivated and vegetables were grown, though the sea spray often blighted any produce. So few and far between were these plots that ropes were often put in place to help the keepers to reach them. Rabbits were introduced and allowed to run

free and these produced an extra supply of food to supplement the fish caught at the two jetties and the birds' eggs harvested from the cliffs. One traveller in 2011 remarked that the rabbits are still there but are now pitiably thin.

The lightkeepers' dwellings on Tearaght, 1905. The lighthouse is reached by means of a covered laneway that winds around the rock from the left-hand house (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

Irish Lights were also very eager to prove that goats would provide the answer to being stranded for weeks, maybe months, by rough seas. They would provide a regular supply of fresh milk and, in an emergency, fresh meat.

By 1901, the station had been made relieving – eight fine houses had been constructed just outside Knightstown on Valentia Island for the keepers on the Skelligs and Inishtearaght, as well as the lighthouse on Cromwell Point. Keepers normally served six weeks on the rock and two weeks off, weather permitting, of course.

Enter Denis Charles Connolly, twenty-two years old, unmarried and a native of Bunmahon on Waterford's Gold Coast. In fact, he had been born in the coastguard's cottage in that place – his father, also Denis, was in 1913, a retired chief officer in the coastguards, living up in Russell Avenue in Drumcondra, north Dublin.

Two years prior to this, Denis Junior had been a fireman, working on the steam trains in and out of Dublin. Although he had only arrived down to Inishtearaght from Kingstown (Dun Laoghaire) five months previously, his neighbours in the lightkeepers' cottages on Valentia spoke of him as having a quiet manner, a gentle expression and a fine physique. His sister shared the house with him and in September 1913, his father had arrived down for a visit but had not yet seen his son, as he was away on the rock.

On the evening of Friday 12th September 1913, Denis Connolly mentioned to the principal keeper that he was going out to round up the goats for milking, as he had

done every day since his arrival at the station. He walked out of the door and was not seen alive again.

Denis was due to relieve the keeper on duty at the lantern later that evening and when he did not turn up, alarm bells began to ring. In addition to the lightkeepers, several workmen were also present on the rock, involved in the construction of a funicular railway from the quay up to the lighthouse – reputedly the steepest in Europe – and changes to the fog signal. Under their foreman, Mr. R. Spencer, they set out to look for the missing keeper.

Inishtearaght lighthouse and the covered walkway leading to the dwellings, 1905
(Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

After a period of time, they found the missing keeper's cap and feared the worst. Their trepidations were realised a little while later when they spotted the missing man many feet below them, wedged in a cleft of rock, his features barely recognisable. It was presumed that, in contrast to the sure-footed goats that he was pursuing, he had slipped on a patch of earth and had been catapulted over the edge.

With great difficulty, the workmen retrieved the body which was then brought back to the lighthouse and a coffin was constructed. On the Saturday, the principal keeper ordered that rockets should be set off to let the people on the mainland know that something was wrong. When it was reported that, on the Saturday evening, blue lights – the light of death – had been shining from the rock throughout the night, the families on the mainland were thrown into a state of high anxiety, not knowing who the unfortunate victim was. For others with loved ones on the Skelligs, it was a stark reminder of how precarious the life of a lightkeeper truly was.

The agony of those on dry land was cruelly prolonged by the weather. A fierce storm blew up, rendering all attempts at relief on the Sunday futile. On the Monday, a hand-picked crew set out in the motorboat of a local Justice of the Peace but the high seas – a by-product of Sunday's storm – prevented them from getting further than the Blasket Sound and they were obliged to turn back. The agitation for the families of the keepers on the rock increased.

On the Tuesday, Captain Maunders of Irish Lights arrived down from Dublin and, after some consultation, commissioned a steam trawler and set out at once for Tearaght, leaving the relatives fraught on the shoreline.

At seven o'clock that evening, word quickly spread that the trawler was returning and a crowd quickly formed on the pier, the relatives to the fore in a state of high agitation. The boat docked, ropes were tied and Mr. Roche, one of the Tearaght men, stepped ashore. As the crowd watched in silence, he approached Denis Connolly's sister and whispered a few words in her ear. In this way, the community on the shore learned the identity of the dead man.

Denis was buried on the craggy slope of Kilmore (Kylemore) Cemetery on Valentia Island, overlooking the sea. His sister and father returned to Dublin.

Allegedly, a member of the Irish Lights Board, at the next meeting of that body, stated that there should be no onus of responsibility on the Board for the keeper's death because the goats were the property of Irish Lights and the minding of them was part and parcel of the lightkeeper's duties.

Kilmore Cemetery

Source:
The Kerryman 27th September 1913

Eugene O'Sullivan, Bull Rock

The Bull Rock lighthouse is one of a triumvirate of lighthouses off the southwest coast of Ireland that were constructed in the second half of the nineteenth century and display the incredible engineering skills of Irish Lights. Inishtearaght, further north, is a stupendously inhospitable island, where any straying from the lighthouse compound was fraught with danger. The Fastnet is a beautiful structure somehow constructed on a wave-swept rock. The Bull Rock may be less claustrophobic than the other two but its semi-circle of lighthouse and dwellings (it looks like a necklace from Dursey Head) around its western heights would be heralded globally if the other two lights did not exist.

After the Calf Rock lighthouse was swept away in a storm in 1881, it was decided that the Bull Rock, which had been the original choice of many, should replace it. (Incidentally, yes, there is a Cow Rock - which is larger in area than the Bull but smaller in height - and a Heifer too)

Miners were landed on the western end of the island in April 1882 and they slowly blasted, drilled and climbed 110 feet up the sheer cliff face where they erected makeshift derricks. Then, and only then, winches, materials, workman's huts, water and provisions were landed and the job of excavating 16,000 cubic yards of cliff face began. Eventually, on 1st January 1889, the station was complete.

At the time of the establishment of the light at Bull Rock, Eugene Sullivan (the prefix O' came later) was a ten-year-old boy growing up in a coastal family. He had born in the townland of Hermitage in the parish of Aghada, county Cork in 1878. His father, Daniel, was described in various documents as a seaman or a coastguard and it is probable that lightkeeping duties were also on his curriculum vitae, as he was allegedly the last person to fire a cannon as a warning to ships before foghorns were introduced.

Given his background, it was therefore not surprising that 'Eugie,' as he was known, should turn to the sea for his livelihood. The 1901 Census shows him as a 22-year-old on Skellig Michael. What is surprising is that he was not a lightkeeper but a general labourer working for a bricklayer. But it is likely that he was employed by Irish Lights, biding his time until a position as a lightkeeper became available.

He may well have been waiting a while because when, as a 26-year-old, he married Bridget Burke from Whitegate in 1904, he was based at Crookhaven but was described as a seaman. It is possible that he worked aboard the *Ierne,* the Irish Lights tender, specially constructed to convey materials to and from the Fastnet rock during the new lighthouse's construction.

Bridget Burke was the daughter of a coastguard. She had been born at Kilmeena, county Mayo, on the shores of Clew Bay, where her father, David, had been a coastguard at Pigeon Point, near Inishgort lighthouse. Her father's work had taken him to Whitegate in Cork on the eastern shore of Cork Harbour, where she would have been a near neighbour to the Sullivans. Her brother Con later became the lightkeeper at Ballycotton.

The children came along at regular intervals – Bridget only appears to have wanted to give birth in even years - and Eugene appears to have been stationed at the Fastnet when each was born. There was Daniel James (DJ) in 1906, David in 1908, Ellen (Nellie) in 1910, Eugene (Eugie) in 1912 and finally John Joseph (JJ) in 1914.

For the first two, Bridget appears to have returned home to Whitegate to give birth but the final three were born at Crookhaven, the shore station for the Fastnet.

Left - Eugene and Bridget 1904. Right - David, Bridget, DJ and Eugene Sullivan (photographs courtesy Owen O'Sullivan)

At some stage after the last birth, Eugene was transferred to the Bull Rock and the family decamped to Dursey Sound, two peninsulas up from Crookhaven. The dwellings at Dursey Sound gaze out at the stump of the Calf Rock lighthouse, which must have been great comfort to any keeper's family stationed there.

It was a fine midsummer's evening on 22nd June 1917 on the Bull Rock. The five occupants of the island were Eugene who, the principal keeper being ashore, was in charge; assistant keepers J.F. Cadden, Michael McGinley – whose son, Sean, was to die thirteen years later at Oyster Island *(see page 165)* - and Alex McCuaig (or McQuaigh), a Rathlin Islander; and Thomas Landy, a fitter from Dublin, who was on the island to carry out some engine repairs.

Eugene was the next keeper due to be relieved and he announced that he was going off to catch some pollock. It was customary for keepers about to be relieved to bring some fresh fish home to their families on the mainland.

Pollock and silver bream were plentiful around the shores of Bull Island. The difficulty lay in reaching the shore. Rugged rocks and vertical cliffs were hazards to be negotiated, knowing that one slip could spell death. However, the prospect of picking up a dozen fresh fish in a few minutes made the scrambling worthwhile.

Cadden was on the 8pm to midnight watch so he went up to the lantern at that time, leaving Landy playing tunes on a violin made by McCuaig. Darkness eventually

fell. It was a fine evening though there was a touch of fog on the headland opposite. This meant that the next keeper on shift – Eugene – would have to prepare the engines for the fog signal off the Pier Head, high above the north-westerly point of the island.

The Bull Rock (Photograph courtesy Dursey Boat Trips)

Cadden took the megaphone and called out for Eugene but there was no reply. McGinley went to attend the fog engines and Cadden returned to the lantern to wind up the winch, which needed attention every twenty minutes. Landy was still banging out tunes on the violin.

They all met back in the engine room and McCuaig assumed command. With the aid of old morse lamps around their necks, a search of the most likely fishing spots was organised, not an easy task given the terrain and the darkness. Pausing to listen for a human voice every so often, they shone lights down precipices and into crevices but could not find the missing keeper.

They brought empty boxes and barrels to the top of the rock and set them on fire in an attempt to attract a passing ship and the morse lamps were kept ready should one approach, but none did. At daybreak, they launched distress signals and then performed a more thorough search of the places they suspected Eugene might have gone. On a large rock on the north-western part of the island, they discovered seven large pollock that had been deposited in a crevice in the rock, evidently to keep them safe prior to the return to the tower. There was no fishing line or rod and no trace to show anybody had been there. Just the seven large pollock.

The keepers were now sure that Eugene had been swept into the sea at that spot by a rogue wave. They sent up flares to add to their flags and eventually a motor launch came around the top of Dursey Island. Using semaphore, they told the launch

what had happened and asked the commander to relay the news to the principal keeper at Dursey Sound. This he did.

The PK later recalled his shock at receiving the news by semaphore so early in the morning and made preparations to come out to the rock as the station could not be left short-handed. But first there was another dreadful task he had to perform.

Three times he knocked on Bridget Sullivan's door and three times the unsuspecting lady greeted him cheerfully and asked him in to share the breakfast. Eventually, on the third visit, he entered and saw the five children eating at the breakfast table.

"*Mrs. Sullivan, I must tell you before I go off to the Rock*…" he said and then blurted out the terrible news.

Many hours were spent with grappling hooks around Bull Island but there was no sign of the missing keeper. The Irish Lights tender, *Ierne*, arrived under Captain J. Rowlands, and landed officers on the rock to ascertain the facts. Word was flashed along the coast to lightkeepers and coastguards.

After a week, Bridget, at her own expense, placed an advertisement in several local newspapers -:

INFORMATION would be thankfully received by Mrs. B Sullivan, Bull Rock Dwellings, Dursey Sound, Garnish, Castletownbere, county Cork, of her Husband, Eugene Sullivan, Irish Lights, who was accidentally drowned off Bull Rock Lighthouse on 22nd July. Height 5ft 8inches; dark hair and moustache, fair complexion, aquiline features, wearing blue Donagree Coat, black and white fine, striped trousers, navy blue vest with brass buttons, "Commissioners of Irish Lights" and a Lighthouse stamped on them; black boots with patent toecaps; inside shirt, white flannel, round neck bound with white tape; fine blue or black socks.

As per the custom, Bridget and her five children had to leave the cottage at Dursey Sound, moving to Belfast, where her father-in-law, Daniel, had retired. Here she worked as a seamstress in a linen mill. Sons David and Danny spent a year in an orphanage in Cork before heading north to join their mother. Later, the family moved back down to Whitegate, where Bridget's brother Con was very good to them. Bridget died in 1934 of influenza, aged only 52 years.

Of the five children, D.J., David and Eugene all became lightkeepers, while John served on the *Ierne.* Ellen married a soldier.

One of D.J.'s sons, also named Eugene, was among the six lightkeepers who handed over the keys of the Baily lighthouse on Monday 24th March 1997, as the country's last manned lighthouse turned automatic.

Sources:
Irish Examiner and others 3rd August 1917
Southern Star 9th January 1937
Sunday Tribune 6th January 1991
Extensive genealogical information and correspondence with grandson Owen O'Sullivan

Elizabeth Moore, Little Samphire Island

It doesn't matter whether you served on a rock station or at a lighthouse on the mainland, the further you go back in time, the greater the risk there was of one or more of your children dying young. Thanks to advancements in medicine, life expectancy has increased beyond measure in the past 200 years.

That is not to say that the death of a child in the olden days was a trifle, an occupational hazard, but whereas we react today with outpourings of grief, they certainly appear to have been more phlegmatic and accepting of it in previous generations. A good example of this is the death, from natural causes, of young Elizabeth Moore on Little Samphire Island in 1919.

As early as 1846, shipowners in Tralee were lobbying for a lighthouse at the entrance of Tralee Bay to guide ships past the outer rocks. In only eight years – a remarkably short space of time – the need for a lighthouse had been determined, the location had been agreed upon and acquired and the lighthouse and single dwelling house had been constructed. The result is a very picturesque lighthouse, particularly when seen from Fenit, sitting contentedly beneath the grandeur of the Slieve Mish mountains of the Dingle peninsula, rather like a surfaced German submarine.

Michael Moore, like many keepers of his generation, was steeped in the tradition of lightkeeping. His father, Thomas had been a lightkeeper for forty years. His great-grandfather, a Jacobite with the odd name of Duplex, had actually tended the coal-burning fires on the roof of the cottage at Loop Head, when lightkeeping was in its infancy in Ireland.

Grainy old photograph of Michael Moore

Michael, himself, had been born in the lighthouse on Wicklow Head. In 1897, he had joined Irish Lights as a supernumerary keeper at Dun Laoghaire. Then his travels began – Clare Island, The Maidens, Loop Head, Roancarrig and from there to Little Samphire Island.

It was while he was at the Maidens that he 'took a wife,' as they say. Unsurprisingly, Caroline McKenna was also of lightkeeping stock. One of her grandfathers had been the male half of the 'Love at the Lighthouse' story, outlined on page 32.

So, the couple arrived at Little Samphire Island with their young family in tow. Thomas had been born in 1908 in Larne, where the shore dwellings for The Maidens were located but George (1909), Elizabeth Catherine (1911) and Caroline (1912) had all been born at Loop Head.

Little Samphire was a one-family station with the wife of the keeper acting as assistant keeper. One keeper who served there in 1950s says it was a most frustrating station as it was so close to the shore you could hear the glasses clinking in the pub on the mainland in the evening. Yet, unfortunately, it was not close enough to the mainland when bad weather sprang up.

In their unique position, Michael and Caroline had front-row seats to one of the most important incidents in Irish history, as Roger Casement was landed at Fenit by a German submarine on 21st April 1916 and the gun-running *Aud* waited impatiently around the islands for contact from Pearse's emissaries. Fatally, the *Aud* had no radio and they were not to know that Pearse had changed the timing of the landing from Holy Thursday to Easter Sunday. Eventually both Casement and the *Aud* were captured.

The Aud

Twice a week, the relief boat used to make the trip to Little Samphire Island with fresh meat and eggs. Christmas was also a time to look forward to, with letters from home and special treats for the children. The arrival of the boat on Christmas Eve 1918 was no exception and great excitement reigned at the lighthouse.

A few hours after the boat had returned to the mainland, eight-year-old Elizabeth took ill. In a newspaper interview, nearly twenty years later, on the occasion of his retirement, Michael recalls the event.

"We put up our flag of distress but the sea meanwhile had got angry and waves were mountain high. For three days and three nights, we watched at her bedside. On the third day, when the storm had gone down, she was dead.

'No boat could venture from the land with the doctor we needed so badly.

'The boat and the doctor came from the mainland alright. 'If I could have come in time, I could have saved her,' said the doctor, but, sure, 'twas no use complaining."

Caroline Moore even had to sew the death shroud for her daughter. The death certificate shows that she died from a combination of meningitis and influenza.

Michael bore no grudge against the sea for the death of his daughter. *"It was a life of grand contemplation*," he recalled, upon his retirement. *"Lonely? Now and again. Bored? Never. Why, you couldn't be bored with the sea."*

The Moores accepted fate and moved on. They were transferred in turn to Inis Oírr, Rotten Island, Tory Island, Ardglass and Blacksod before finishing up at the East Pier lighthouse in Howth.

After retirement, Michael and Caroline moved to the township of Gooloogong in New South Wales, where their son, Thomas, was stationed as a priest. George, worked as a civil engineer in Sydney before being killed in 1942 in the war. Their only surviving daughter, Caroline, became a Holy Cross sister in South Africa and lived to be 100.

Little Samphire on 9th April 2020, the lowest recorded tide since records began. It is hard to believe that short distance was insurmountable for emergency aid but it serves again to demonstrate the power of the sea. (Photograph courtesy Trisha O'Halloran)

Source:
Irish Press 31st August 1937

Leo Higginbotham, Straw Ireland

From Irish Independent, Thursday 7thth August 1919: -

Deaths – Higginbotham – July 29th 1919, accidentally drowned while bathing at Straw Island Lighthouse, Galway, Leo, second son of James and Mary Higginbotham, Greenore Lighthouse, aged 39 years. Sacred Heart of Jesus have mercy on him. Funeral took place from Cathedral after High Mass for interment New Cemetery, Galway on 2nd August.

Straw Island lighthouse

Leo Joseph Higginbotham was a Donegal man, born in 1880 in Burtonport when his father was stationed at Arranmore Island. He joined Irish Lights as a supernumerary assistant keeper in August 1901 and became assistant keeper in December of the same year. He married Margaret Loughery from Shroove at Moville county Donegal in 1910. The original Irish Lights service record indicates he had an adopted daughter aged three years when he died.

Sources:
Tuam Herald 9th August 1919
Genealogical research by and conversations with Anne Dooris, grand-niece

William Duff, Codling (South Arklow) Lightship

From the Enniscorthy Guardian 16th April 1921 –

Wexford Captain's Sad Death – The tragic news of the death of Mr. William Duff, 52, Mulgrave-street, Dun Laoghaire, which occurred on Friday 8th April rather suddenly on board the Codling Bank Lightship came as a great shock to his relatives and friends. He was master of the Codling Bank Lightship and he left home a few days previously, apparently in the best of health, to join his ship. He took ill on Thursday and, as he displayed alarming symptoms, the crew sent up rockets and flew a signal for assistance. However, the night passed without any sign of the help arriving, but on Friday, a Canadian gun boat, which was passing the Bank, observed the call and sent a launch alongside, but about the same time, Capt. Duff passed away. The gun boat sent a wireless message to Dun Laoghaire conveying the sad tidings and at once the Irish Light's steamship Ierne *proceeded to the Codling Bank and returned with Capt. Duff's remains.*

The late Capt. Duff was 29 years in the Irish Lights service. He served in various positions of trust and was, in turn, stationed at various points around the Irish coast, including Wexford, Cobh, the North of Ireland and, for the past 15 years in Dun Laoghaire and for 12 of the latter as Master of the ship on which his death occurred. Capt. Duff was 50 years of age and was born at The Faythe, Wexford, where his mother still lives and he was one of the best known and esteemed figures in maritime circles on the South Eastern Coast. In his long career of active association with the Irish seafaring community, he had many dangerous and exciting experiences and he won a host of warm admirers.

Codling Bank Lightship c.1906 (photo courtesy the National Library of Ireland)

I have only come across a handful of men who died of natural causes aboard a lightship. How coincidental is it that two of them should be called William Duff? *(See also, William Duff, Kish lightship, page 125)*

Marion McMahon, Hook Head

Marion (aka Marian or Mary Anne – all three were used on official documents interchangeably) McMahon was one of the numerous Scattery Islanders that found employment with Irish Lights. Her father, Patrick Brennan was a pilot for the ships entering the Shannon estuary bound for Limerick and also worked a piece of land on the island. Her grandfather, Felix Brennan, was also a pilot in the days when there was no light at all between Tarbert and the city docks. River pilots were highly skilled boatmen who used currachs to get to and from the ships they piloted.

Born in 1889, Marion married another islander, Stephen McMahon, who was six years her senior. Like the Brennans, the McMahons were steeped in the piloting business. Stephen's mother, Bridget, was a member of the Scanlan family that also spawned many a lightshipman and lightkeeper.

They were married in 1910 in Kilrush when Stephen, a lightkeeper, was stationed at Blacksod Bay on the beautiful Belmullet peninsula in county Mayo. Later, they moved to Oyster Island and then to Valentia Island in Kerry.

Location of Hook Head (courtesy of Mapcarta)

In 1919, Stephen was transferred to Hook Head in county Wexford, one of the oldest lighthouses in the world, though it had been much altered down the years. There are tales that St. Dubhan and his followers arrived on the peninsula from Wales in 452A.D. and immediately started burning a fire on the headland to warn shipping of the dangers, a nightly occurrence that took place for the following 700 years which, to be honest, seems a tad unlikely.

It was the Normans who first built a tower where the present lighthouse stands in the early 1200s and then handed it over to the monks to keep the fire alight at night on its top. Remnants of the original tower may still be seen at the site. With the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1540s, the monks were booted out and the light ceased for several years until the enormous toll in shipwrecks led to the relighting of the revamped tower.

Hook with the lightkeepers' cottages. The original colour of the lighthouse was white. Three red bands, ten feet wide and nine feet apart, were added in 1859. In 1933, the three red bands were replaced by the current two black bands.

In July 1922, the principal keeper at Hook was one Thomas Faulkner; his two assistants were Stephen McMahon and Andrew Coughlan. There were now eight children in the McMahon household, the youngest, Brendan, being only one month old.

On 2nd July, Marion McMahon was in their kitchen, preparing Sunday dinner and doubtless warning the older children to keep an eye on the younger ones.

Stephen McMahon had been to Mass in Templetown Church, four miles away on the road to Fethard. He arrived back at the house at one o'clock and talked with his wife for about a quarter of hour. He later said that she seemed in fine spirits and she went out for a walk before serving up dinner, as she was in the habit of doing.

Shortly afterwards, one of the children came down the stairs and informed his father that he had seen his mother climbing down onto the rocks below the lighthouse. Stephen sent the three eldest boys down to the rocks to make sure that Marion was okay. They returned in a few minutes, saying there was no sign of her.

Alarmed, Stephen ran down to the rocks that his son had indicated and spotted his wife floating in a cave. It was obvious that she was dead. He ran back up to the station and breathlessly told the two keepers, Faulkner and Coughlan, what had occurred. Together, they went down to the spot but the waves were such that they were unable to retrieve the body. An occasional wave, larger than the rest, would come crashing in, sweeping everything before it, and it was surmised that Marion had been caught by one of these and swept into the angry sea.

Eventually, word was sent to Churchtown and, with the help of a number of men from the village, they managed to retrieve the body and carried it up to the house.

A question was asked at the inquest of Stephen McMahon if he had ever seen his wife depressed or in such a mental state that she might kill herself. This indicated there was a doubt in the mind of the Justices that the death was really an accident. This happened long before the phrase 'post-natal depression' had been coined but 'disturbance of the maternal instinct following childbirth' was a known syndrome and stigmatised to such a degree that a woman thus afflicted would want to hide it.

Stephen categorically replied that she was in good spirits and he had *'never noticed anything mentally wrong with my wife*,' which was corroborated by Thomas Faulkner. He added that she often went outside before dinner and, in the absence of any further witnesses, the jury's verdict was 'accidental drowning.'

Hook lighthouse today on the coast where Marion drowned

Stephen McMahon, grandson of Stephen and Marion takes up what happened next.

"The family stayed in Hook after their mother's death despite the fact that the eldest of the remaining seven, my dad Sylvester, was nine years old at the time. The baby, Brendan, was sent back to Scattery Island and was reared by one or both sets of grandparents.

'It was a family story that Patricia, the eldest daughter, got the job of minding her remaining younger siblings. However, there was more than one family at the Hook so I presume she got some help."

Much later, when the family were practically reared, Stephen remarried and had three further children.

Marion's baby, Brendan, also became a lightkeeper of many years standing. He served at the Skellig Rock and Rathlin O'Beirne (twice) lighthouses amongst others and was the last keeper on the latter before automation. He also served at Tarbert, near his father's homeland on the River Shannon. In fact, he was serving at Tarbert in July 1952 – thirty years after the death of his mother – when his father, who was also living there, had a stroke and died. He was 69 years of age and was buried on Scattery Island.

When the lighthouse on Scattery was automated in 1933, the McMahon family minded the light as attendants for the next sixty years.

Marion, despite reports that she was also laid to rest on Scattery, was in fact buried in the grounds of Templetown Church, on the road between Hook and Fethard. 75 years later, her daughter Patricia, who had been seven at the time of the accident and is widely acknowledged as being the force that kept the family together following the tragedy, joined her.

Marion's grave in Templetown

Sources:
Genealogical research and conversations with Stephen McMahon, grandson.
Liam Ryan article *Drowning Fatality at Hook Head*
Irish Independent 20th June 1952

Patrick McGinley, The Baily

The principal lightkeeper at the Baily Lighthouse in Howth, county Dublin, one Patrick John McGinley (sometimes MacGinley), put on his coat and boots and made for the door. It was Monday 30th August 1926.

"*I'm just going down to Howth to cash a cheque for the men,*" he told his son, Raymond, with whom he shared the house. A widower and a Corkman, he had always enjoyed good health. In his 29 years with Irish Lights[5], he had served on various rock lights including Ballycotton and Skellig Michael, but he had landed on his feet here at the Baily.

The Baily Lighthouse with the keepers' cottages sitting above it

There is evidence to suggest that the Celts lit fires upon this headland to warn early mariners of the dangers of this coastline and, in 1665, it was recognised as being one of the six places where a lighthouse was needed. This first crude lighthouse consisted of a cottage with a small tower attached, from the top of which coal was burned nightly in a brazier. It was situated near today's car park on the Summit.

[5] It is remarkable how many keepers died after 29 years' service with Irish Lights

In 1790, a proper tower was built on the same site, complete with lantern and Argand lamps, but all too frequently it was obscured by mist and low cloud due to its height. Consequently, when the Ballast Board took over control of the nation's lighthouses, the present lighthouse was built at a much lower level. It was first established on St. Patrick's Day 1814.

The lighthouse had a ringside seat to the sinking of the *Queen Victoria* paddle-steamer on the morning of 15th February 1853 in which 83 passengers and crew died. Bound from Liverpool to Dublin, she struck Howth Head in a blinding snowstorm. Accusations that the lantern had been obscured by accumulated snow were flatly denied by elderly principal keeper George Gregory, who may have been the father of Edward Gregory, whose wife was a central character in the John Doyle poisoning case at Slyne Head in 1859 *(see page 49.)* George Gregory was 'between seventy and eighty' years of age and had been the principal keeper at the Baily for the previous fifteen years.

The captain of the boat (who died in the incident) ordered the engines to be reversed and she backed off the rocks but unfortunately, she had been badly holed and, with water pouring in, she drifted back onto the rocks and sank very quickly.

At the inquest, the captain and the first officer were blamed for the tragedy for driving at speed with no visibility but the Ballast Board also came in for stick for the absence of a fog bell. A similar incident seven years previously had led to demands for a fog bell to be installed at the Baily but this hadn't happened. When asked why, the reason was given that other projects had been prioritised. The promised fog bell materialised at the Baily within two months of the accident.

The Baily in the twentieth century was very much Head Office for the lightkeepers. It was where they did their training before being sent out to some of the wildest shores in the world. Supernumerary keepers bided their time here waiting (literally) for their chance to shine.

The journey to Howth from the lighthouse is not a long one. It would have taken Patrick well under an hour, even though there is a steep climb at the beginning up to the Summit. Taking the diagonal footpath up the hillside, he would have passed the site of the two previous lighthouses on the headland. But from there, it was downhill all the way, past the Martello Tower and down to the old harbour.

While in the village, it is probable that Patrick met up with some acquaintances, or maybe he stopped by the 1818 pier light to talk with the keeper there, for it was dark and raining when he set off back for his own lighthouse. For company, he had one Charles Daly who lived up at the Summit. Mr. Daly told the subsequent inquest that Patrick was sober and seemed in good health. They parted at the Summit, with Patrick taking the footpath down the Green Baily to the lighthouse.

The following morning, William Kenny, of the Baily Post Office, was doing his rounds, thankful that the rain of the previous night had stopped and it was a bright clear morning. Suddenly, he heard a shout coming from the lane that led to the lighthouse. On further investigation, he found poor Patrick lying on his back, arms spread-eagled on the footpath that led down from the Summit to the lane. It was obvious that he had been lying there all night for his clothes were soaking wet. The lightkeeper told him that he thought he must have had a stroke, as he could not move his hands or his feet.

Google Satellite map of the Baily. The lighthouse is at the bottom of the picture, at the end of the lane, which leads to the main road, where the postman heard Patrick's cries. Patrick would have taken the short cut from the Summit (marker) until he almost reached the lane. The black X marks his rough position when found

The postman immediately rushed to the lighthouse to summon aid and several men ran down to the spot where he was lying, including his son Raymond. The place was visible from the lighthouse but not from the main road. Raymond had not actually realised that his father had been out all night.

"*What is wrong with you, Dad?*" asked Raymond.

"*My God, I have got a stroke and cannot use any of my limbs*," replied his father.

Quickly, the men picked up the helpless keeper and got him back to the lighthouse, where he remained for the rest of the day. However, when there was no improvement on the following day, 1st September, he was removed to Mercer's Hospital on the south side of the city.

Upon examination by Dr. O'Kelly, the house surgeon, it was surmised that Patrick was paralysed due to a spinal injury caused by a fall. However, a secondary examination revealed no injury and his paralysis was instead attributed to a functional disorder.

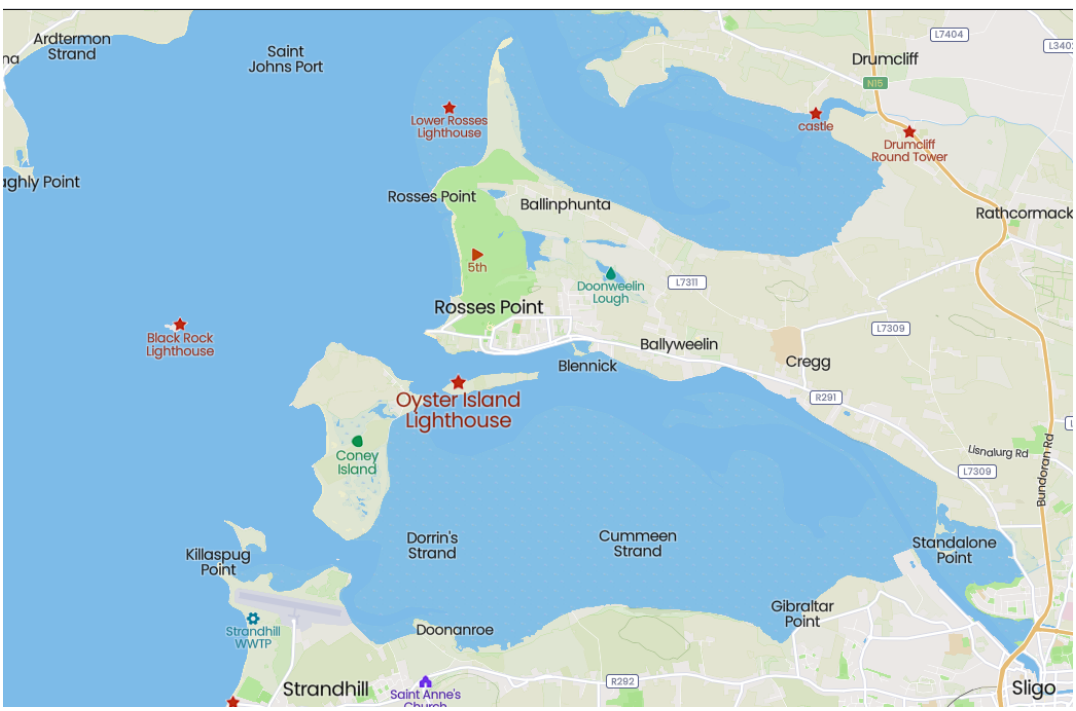
Unfortunately, because of his spending the night of the 30th August lying on the hillside in the pouring rain, pneumonia set in and Patrick died on Wednesday 8th September 1926.

Sources:
Dublin Evening Packet 24th February 1853
Evening Herald 9th September 1926
Leinster Express 10th September 1926

Sean McGinley Oyster Island

One of the most poignant and, indeed, harrowing deaths at a lighthouse must be that of four-year old Sean (or John) F. McGinley at Oyster Island.

Oyster Island is a green strip of land marking the entrance to the inner section of Sligo Bay. It looks deceptively sedate lying just off Rosses Point but the currents between the two can be treacherous. Many former keepers have expressed the view that it was quite a frustrating station to be sent to, with shops and pubs in full view but just out of reach.



Map showing location of Oyster Island (Courtesy Mapcarta)

Two lights were constructed on the island in 1837, in a rough northwest-southeast delineation, which served to give ships the correct lead into the port of Sligo. Over time, this became less and less accurate and in 1891 a temporary light was established which, when lined up with the iconic Metal Man to the northwest of the island, would provide the correct lead. The two older lighthouses were then demolished and the north light was rebuilt further west of its original position, which explains why the keeper's cottages are a bit of a walk away from the present light.

In 1930, there were four keepers based at Oyster Island and a strict rota was in operation. At any one time, there were always two keepers stationed at Blackrock Sligo lighthouse, out in the bay. On Oyster Island, were the remaining two keepers, and the wives and families of all four keepers. Each keeper did six weeks on Oyster Island and two weeks on Blackrock. When rostered on Oyster Island, it was also part

of the job to look after the lights at the Metal Man, Coney Island, Lower Rosses Point and Bomore Point.

Oyster Island lighthouse 2015 with Coney Island behind

The arrival of a new lightkeeper and his family was always a red-letter day on any station. The keepers would maybe renew an old acquaintance or spend hours talking about other keepers they had worked with; wives would have somebody new to talk to; and children would be shown around by the children of the resident keepers and make new friends very quickly.

Therefore, Sunday 30th June 1930 was a day of great excitement on Oyster Island, with the arrival of a new principal keeper and his young family. Mr. Duffy, the former principal keeper had retired and his replacement was Principal Keeper Michael Richard McGinley, 55, a Donegal man, who had been in charge of the St. John's Point lighthouse in county Down. He arrived with his wife, Edith (daughter of lightkeeper Frederick Curling), who was thirty years his junior, four-year-old son, Sean, and a baby only a few weeks old.

The family arrived at the small stone pier in the twelve-foot boat during a beautiful summer's afternoon. Two boys, Ted and Michael Hawkins, from keeper Daniel Hawkins' family, took Sean in hand while the adults went to sort out the cottage and meet the neighbours and they played on the pier for a couple of hours until called in for their tea at 5pm.

As the Hawkins boys ran home, another keeper, 'Biff' Boyle, escorted Sean McGinley off the pier and secured the gate behind him, telling him to run off home to his new house on the highest part of the island.

Tea over, the two Hawkins boys ran back to the pier, little suspecting that anything was wrong. They noticed that the twelve-foot boat that had been tied to the stone pier was now drifting fifty yards offshore and surmised that it must have come loose somehow. But there was no big panic. Sure, wasn't Pat McGowan, the boatman, setting out from Rosses Point to pick it up?

It was only when Pat arrived at the stone pier that they discovered, inside the boat, a pair of shoes and a pair of stockings folded on top of them. And then the truth hit.

Sean, who was in love with the sea, must have slipped back to the pier, somehow surmounted or evaded the obstruction of the pier gate and clambered into the boat. Whether he untethered the ropes himself or they simply fell loose due to the noticeably large tide, nobody will ever know, but he must have found himself drifting away from the shore. He removed his shoes and stockings, placed them neatly in the bottom of the boat and climbed out in order to paddle back to the shore.

The problem was that the sea was twelve feet deep very close to the pier. It would have been difficult for a strong swimmer to have swum to shore in such a tide; for a four-year old boy, he was doomed the moment he clambered out.

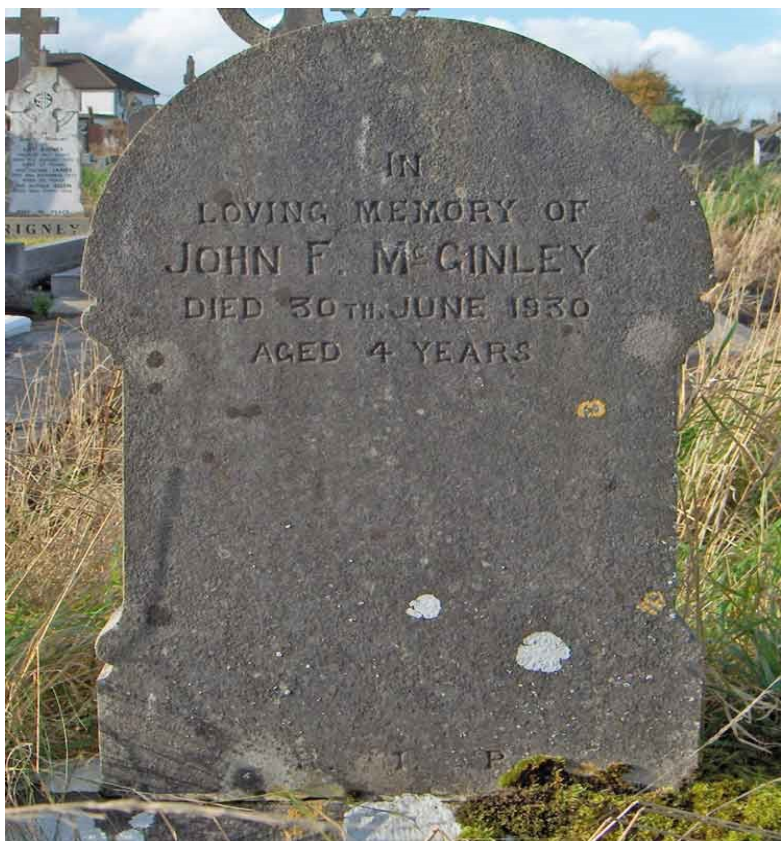
The relief boat, maybe the same one that Sean McGinley tried to escape from, arrives at Oyster Island c.1926. Rosses Point is in the background. (Photograph copyright estate of Eileen Kates, used by permission.)

The alarm was raised immediately and many boats from the locality took to the water, searching for the body of the little boy. To pile on the agony for the distraught parents, it was not until 2pm on the following afternoon, that the body was found, by a Mr. J. McGowan of Upper Rosses. It had been washed up at Deadman's Point, at the

furthest reach of Rosses Point, where the bay widens out, only 300 yards from where it was estimated that Sean entered the water.

When the body was brought back to the island, it was wrapped in a white sheet and carried from the slip up to his parent's new house. Michael Hawkins, then aged seven, wrote sixty years later that he never forgot that sight. All amusements in Rosses Point were temporarily suspended to show solidarity with the distraught family barely one day in the community.

Sean was buried at Sligo cemetery, where his headstone still stands, a little rough and ready but still perfectly legible. His father was immediately transferred to another station.



Headstone, Sligo Cemetery

Sources:
Sligo Champion 5th July 1930
Ballina Herald 2nd August 1930
Donegal News 26th August 1930
Michael A. Hawkins *Childhood at Oyster Island, Beam Magazine* No. 29
Communication with Lauren McGinley, family

John Quirke, *Lucifer* Lightship

I wonder if seamen of old, being allegedly superstitious chaps, minded being posted to the *Lucifer* light-vessel. Probably not as much as their English counterparts who were seconded to the *Shambles, Inner Dowsing* or, worse still, the *Sunk*.

The Lucifer Shoals lie twelve miles off the coast of Wexford harbour, roughly midway between the Tuskar Rock and the *Blackwater* lightship and it was deemed expedient in May 1868 to place a lightship here. As with many of the lightships along the south and east coasts of Ireland, it was manned mainly by Wexford men. In fact, all seven men on board on the vessel in the 1901 Census were Yellow-bellies, mostly from around The Faythe and Parnell Street.

John Joseph Quirke came from this fishing heartland (Fisher's Row) though by 1933 he was living in Waterloo Road. 56 years of age, he was not a regular member of the lightship crew but was doing a temporary tour of duty while a crew member was ill. He had spent most of his working life serving on ocean-going vessels. In fact, at the outbreak of the First World War, he had found himself on a vessel in a German port and ended up being interred in a prisoner-of-war camp for four years.

He had married Margaret Ann Lucking in 1903 and had three daughters – Mary Kate, Jane and Margaret Ann – and two sons, Patrick Joseph and John Patrick. The latter were twins, born on St. Patrick's Day 1912.

Three-masted lightship on the Lucifer Shoals (Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

On Thursday 1st June 1933, John's only real physical task was to scrub the deck of the ship. He had always been a strong and healthy man and had known little sickness in his life. In fact, that evening he remarked to one of his shipmates, Joseph Walsh, that he had never felt in better form and reckoned he would live to be a hundred. If ever a statement tempted fate ….

He took the 8pm to midnight watch on the ship and then retired to his bed. At 2.30 am, Joseph Walsh spoke to him and he seemed in good form. One hour later, Walsh spoke to him again but this time he got no reply. He looked over and saw that John's left arm was hanging out of his hammock. On further investigation, he discovered that his shipmate had died.

Robert Roche, the mate, was notified and he confirmed the death. He then attempted to communicate with shore by means of lights and rockets but, owing to the fog that had descended, these were not seen. However, he managed to communicate with a Captain Perry in the *SS Pine* bound for Passage East from Newry and, on its arrival, a telephone call was made to the lifeboat station at Rosslare Harbour, informing them that there was a dead body aboard the lightship.

Coxswain James Wickham then proceeded with his crew to the *Lucifer* on Saturday morning. The dense fog still prevailing, it took them nearly two hours to reach the ship and other two to return to the coast, where the dead man was conveyed to the County Hospital.

The inquest, held the following Tuesday, was slightly surreal in that the witnesses were questioned and the coroner declared that he was absolutely satisfied that it was a case of death by natural causes but he could not return a verdict because there was no medical evidence. The inquest had originally been pencilled in for the Monday but had been put back to the Tuesday at the doctor's request. However, the doctor had not turned up and was stated to be in Dublin.

The doctor turned up to the rearranged inquest on Wednesday afternoon, saying he was 'extremely sorry' for the inconvenience, but he had been called away and had totally forgotten about the inquest. He had made a superficial examination of the body and found no marks of violence, so he was happy that it was a natural death, probably heart failure. Or maybe a stroke. Both reasons were entered on the death certificate.

There was a large attendance at John's funeral at Crosstown Cemetery and ships in the harbour flew their flags at half-mast.

Sources:
New Ross Standard 9th June 1933
Munster Express 9th June 1933

Lambe and Woods, Dundalk Bay

Navigational lights around the coast of Ireland were not, and indeed are not, restricted to lighthouses and lightships. Most of our harbours have strictly defined navigable channels that boats and ships must follow between the port and the open sea and the limits of these are marked by buoys or beacons or perches. The lower reaches of rivers like Shannon, the Liffey, the Lee, the Boyne and the Lagan were all lit at night-time by beacons and perches and, before the days of automation, it was somebody's job to go out in small craft to light them before sunset with the requisite amount of oil to last until dawn.

The work of the lamplighter was a vital cog in the smooth running of any port or harbour yet, whereas the keeper of the lighthouse in his peaked cap and spotless uniform was venerated by the local community, his counterpart on the 'gondalow' or skiff went about his work almost unnoticed. It is strange that, although the pages of this book are flush with lightkeepers paying the ultimate price, the job of a lamplighter was far more dangerous. Whatever the weather, in biting cold or howling winds, in seas choppy and dangerous, he would be out there every day in a fragile craft, shinning up slippery ladders with oil or paraffin to trim the wicks and provide a safe, guiding light for night-time shipping. The fact that very few drowned is testament to the innate boating skills these men possessed, passed down through the generations.

The pay was not an enticement to join the ranks. For the most part, the men were fishermen or river pilots, sometimes local farmers, who applied for the contract to light the lamps as a means of supplementing their meagre incomes. Very few, if any, were able to make a living from their lamplighting activities alone.

Thus in 1936, John Lambe, James Woods, Arthur Hughes and John Callan earned 16 shillings per day by going out in a motor yawl on the ebb tide, lighting the twelve lights of the beacons and perches that marked the course of the channel between Dundalk lighthouse and the harbour and returning on the flood tide. It was a tender awarded annually by the Harbour Board and supplemented their main occupation as river pilots.

The men worked in pairs, day about, with Lambe and Woods pairing up together. Both men lived in Quay Street, so their teaming-up made sense. At each stop, the wooden ladder would have to be scaled, a tricky job on the finest of evenings, bringing up the necessary oil to fuel the light throughout the hours of darkness.

John (Johnny) Lambe was 42 and was renowned for his seamanship and local knowledge. He had been a river pilot since 1919, following in the footsteps of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, and knew every inch of the harbour and bay, even stepping in as harbour master on occasions. He had a wife and nine children.

James 'Jimmy' Woods had also been a pilot for many years, like his father before him. He had worked on the quays before entering into service with the Harbour Board in 1927. Unlike his workmate, he was a strong swimmer. In his younger years, he had been a powerful Gaelic footballer with the local Rangers team, captaining them to the junior championship and the junior league in 1917. He had a wife and six children.

Map of Dundalk harbour today. The channel has barely changed since 1936.

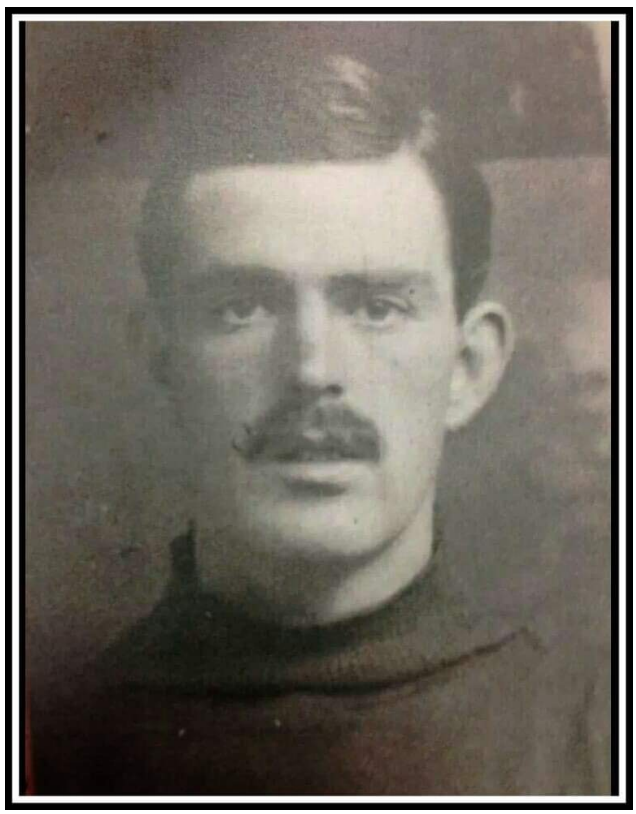
The previous year, 1935, the two men had had a harrowing experience when out lighting the beacons. At one of these, their boat had been swept away, leaving them hanging grimly to the wooden ladder. There they hung for several hours before the stationmaster at Bellurgan was alerted to their plight by the frantic waving of their coats.

That experience was long forgotten when, on the afternoon of Monday 10th February, the two men met in the harbour master's office, prior to their journey out to the lamps. An easterly gale was blowing and it was suggested that it was too dangerous to go out but the men felt that the lamps would need to be lit for any ship seeking refuge from the gale and they surmised that the storm had nearly blown itself out and would soon moderate.

Unfortunately, despite their years of experience, they were wrong on that last prediction. Not only did the gale not moderate, but it actually intensified into one of the worst storms in living memory, blowing from east-south-east. Damage was widespread in the town and members of a search party later reported being blown over on the front. Large parts of the country were flooded. In addition to the gale-force winds, a blizzard decided to join the fray and the temperatures plummeted.

Lambe and Woods set out from the Russian Oil Products' quay at around 3.30pm, decked out in their top boots, oilskins and sou'wester hats. They started at the harbour and slowly worked their way out towards the lighthouse. It was later seen that seven of the beacons had been lit in the channel, giving an indication as to where

the accident took place. One suggestion that did the rounds was that one of the men had fallen off the ladder ascending the next beacon and, in the foaming torrent, the other had fallen in trying to fish him out.



James Woods (Photograph courtesy of Sarah Louisa Murphy)

The two men would normally be expected to return by around 7pm but, given the terrible conditions, there was no initial concern when they did not appear at that time. However, when 8pm passed, Arthur Hughes and John Callan began to get worried and contacted Captain Higgins, the harbour master, who, in turn, contacted the Gardaí. There then commenced an all-night search in horrendous conditions by the three men already mentioned, together with Patrick Cheshire, (the captain of the tug,) Tommy Gray, Jack Hughes and John McArdle, all volunteers, together with Guards Burke, Kiernan and Kiely from the nearby Bridge Street Station.

They split into three groups and first searched the west side of the channel. *"It was a terrible gale,"* Captain Higgins said later. *"For most of the way, we could only crawl and there were times when some of the men were up to their waists in water. It was blowing cold from the east and the cold was biting. We searched every corner of the grounds for hours."*

At two o'clock in the morning, two men – John McArdle and James McCormack - drove to Bellurgan on the other side of the bay, from where they proceeded to search the northern shore. At four in the morning, Charlie Clarke, Tommy Clarke, Joe Rice and John Shields launched a small motorboat in extremely dangerous conditions and

searched the perches on the east side of the channel. This involved climbing up the ladders to check that the men were not on top and was hazardous in the extreme. However, like all the other search parties, no sign of the missing men was discovered.

Eventually, in the morning, the boat was found, south of Soldiers Point on the banks of the Blackwater River. It had no oars or rudder and about six feet of the painter (the rope used for tying or towing) was found a few yards away. Patrick Cheshire, still going after his all-night ordeal, found the oars and the tiller shortly afterwards. A boat-hook and an anchor were also discovered.

At last, at around five o'clock in the early evening, the two bodies were found near the flood gates on the Blackwater River. A lot of the land around the area has since been reclaimed but the flood gates were probably located just south of where the Riverside estate is today. The river eventually joined up with the main navigable channel and it is believed the bodies were carried in on the flood tide.

Memorial at Soldier's Point, Dundalk to the two men

When found, the bodies were practically side by side. The watch found in James Woods' pocket was stopped at 5.15 and it was surmised that the men had died, or at least entered the water, at this time. Their proximity to each other led many people to believe that maybe one of them could have survived but chose not to leave his friend and colleague. The coroner's verdict was that James Woods had drowned but that John Lambe had died of exposure.

The funeral was one of the largest ever witnessed in the town with practically all the townspeople turning out. Three hundred riverside workers led the procession, followed by the Harbour Commissioners.

Because the lamplighting work had been tendered out, the Harbour Commissioners could not, by law, pay compensation to the two widows and fifteen fatherless children left behind. Their only jurisdiction over the men would have been a case of dereliction of duty, an instance which certainly did not apply. Thankfully, a public subscription was raised and generously supported, although at least one of the children had to leave school and find work to support his family.

Today, the channel lights are powered by batteries with a life span of up to two years and maintenance is minimal.

The graves of John Lambe and James Woods in Dowdallshill Cemetery,

Thus Louth's fair head today is bent
In silent prayer and hushed lament,
For men who knew where danger lay
If storm-tossed ship should seek the bay.
They mann'd the boat to trim the light
That guides seafarers through the night.

Bron Sailors they, reared to the sea,
They learned their art on father's knee.
But ocean ne'er was conquered yet,
It laughs at man and man's regret.

Two homes today have lost their light
(alas! their dark darkest night)
for they are gone who made them bright.
But God and man will do their part
To soothe the stricken widow's heart
And cheer the children of the brave
Who died, their fellow man to save.
Louth's unborn sons, in storms or calm,
Will boast the names of Woods and Lambe.
Comrades on land – locked in the deep,
Washed on – and side by side they sleep.

P. Fox, Newry

Photograph of Mrs Lambe and her nine fatherless children, as it appeared in the local papers

Sources:
Belfast Telegraph 11th February 1936
Evening Herald 11th February 1936
Belfast Newsletter 12th February 1936 and others
Irish Press and others 13th February 1936
Irish Examiner 15th February 1936
Dundalk Democrat 15th February 1936
Dundalk Democrat 3rd July 1993 and others
Communication with Sarah Louisa Murphy, great-granddaughter of James Woods

Patrick Monaghan, Blackrock, Mayo

Tragedy In Erris

LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER SWEPT TO HIS DEATH

A LONELY OCEAN OUTPOST

YOUNG BLACKSOD BRIDE'S TERRIBLE SHOCK

Contemporary newspaper headlines

The life of a temporary lightkeeper on the coasts of Ireland was always tenuous. If a keeper on a station was suddenly taken ill or injured himself, or if he needed to be absent for a week for personal reasons, the choice for Irish Lights was a simple one. They could send down a Supernumerary Keeper from the Baily in Howth, normally a new recruit who was short on hands-on experience. The problem with this was that it often took two or more days for an SLK to actually make it to the station, maybe more if the weather was unkind.

The other option was to get in a temporary keeper, a local man who had been trained up on all aspects of the lightkeeper's work and who invariably could do the job with his eyes shut. He was often someone who could be brought over to the island at the drop of a hat, without remonstration from an employer. As such, fishermen were ideally suited for the position.

One such fisherman was Patrick Monaghan who lived in the townland of Glosh on the beautiful if somewhat isolated Mullet peninsula. The region is spacious and treeless and looks out onto the broad sweep of the Atlantic Ocean, the Duvillaun islands to the left, the Inishkeas to the right and between them, but much further out, eight miles in fact, the conical shape of Blackrock Island, with its tiny stump of the lighthouse silhouetted on top.

Established in 1864 to mark the entrance to Blacksod Bay, the lighthouse stands 300 feet above the high-water mark on the western extremity of the island. Entry to the lighthouse was by breeches-buoy whereby a keeper was hoisted on a rope from the boat. Even in calm weather, nearing the island involves great risk. In rough weather, the sea lashes the rock and becomes a foaming maelstrom of white water when, in the pre-helicopter days, the island was completely unapproachable.

It was a harsh station with reliefs often weeks, or months overdue, courtesy of unfavourable weather conditions. As a twenty-three-year-old, in 1934, Patrick was one of six Blacksod fishermen who attempted the overdue relief of the lighthouse in a four-ton motorboat, only to be hit by a gale and washed up on Achill Island, luckily without terrible consequences. Patrick's father, also Patrick, was a farmer-cum-fisherman who had served for many years as a temporary keeper at the lighthouse that he could see from his home.

Patrick Monaghan (Photograph courtesy Cathal Murray)

On 18th April 1937, Patrick (the son) married Kate Heneghan, a local girl from Tarmon, whose parents were both deceased. She was slightly older than her new husband. Around this time, presumably to supplement a precarious income from farming and fishing, Patrick applied to become a temporary lightkeeper, like his father before him.

On the first week of July, after barely ten weeks of married life, the call came and Patrick set off for the familiar lighthouse atop Blackrock. He had been working on a fretwork picture-frame for the house and his carpentry tools still lay around the dwelling. They hoisted him onto the island and he began what was supposed to be a six-week tour of duty.

But the sea is no respecter of lightkeepers' rosters nor matrimonial harmony and unusually heavy seas stretched the tour of duty from six weeks to seven, eight, nine. There was nothing to be done, except wait. Patrick idled away the time carving a toy boat for a neighbour. Out there on the rock, lives were regulated by the vagaries of the ocean.

Naturally, Irish Lights were aware of this. Despite lurid newspaper accounts, no keeper on a rock lighthouse was ever in real danger of starvation, though many were

obliged to vary their diet by catching fish or taking birds' eggs. Stocks of food and water, though, were always kept well-topped up for the worst possible scenario.

The fresh water on Blackrock was stored in a large container at a low level on the rock, fifty feet below the base of the lighthouse. Access to it was by a series of precariously steep steps, hewn into the cliff, that had to be negotiated very carefully, even in the calmest of weather. At 2.30 pm on Friday 17th September, Patrick took hold of the bucket and went down the steps to the flat rock where the container stood to fetch the proverbial pail of water. He never returned.

As the time for his expected reappearance passed, his two fellow-keepers went down to look for him. Because of the harsh topography of the island, the search did not take very long. There are very few places on that desolate spot where a man could be. The supposition was that a large wave had crashed over the rock and swept him out to sea. He was 27 years old.

About thirty years later, keepers Brendan Conway and Jimmy Ward were fishing down on the same rock. The sea was calm. Suddenly they heard a roar which they knew signified a change in the sea. They both started running hell for leather back up the cliff but the wave caught them. Brendan clung on but Jimmy was ripped from his perch back into the sea. "*I thought Jimmy was gone but then the sea boiled once more and he landed back at my feet,"* said Brendan. *"His shirt was in shreds and bloodied due to the barnacles."* It was possibly such a wave that caught out Patrick Monaghan who wasn't as blessed as Jimmy Ward.

Through a wireless transmitter, the 1937 keepers relayed the news to the mainland. Irish Lights were informed and Patrick's family too. A boat was made ready to search for the body of the missing man but the weather refused to yield and it could not put out.

From all over the peninsula, people came to Glosh in a great show of solidarity to sympathise with Patrick's parents and wife. Throughout the night, the sound of the Rosary could be heard intermittently around the house. For several days afterwards, Gardaí and volunteers patrolled the Mullet coast, hoping to retrieve the body but it was a forlorn hope. The body was never found.

Kate naturally was distraught. *"I cannot look out the windows without seeing the water,"* she said. *"I would like to go away from here because I am thinking of poor Paddy."* Her father-in-law was keen for her to come and live with them as her own parents were dead. The only family she had was a brother and sister but they had moved to England.

What Patrick Monaghan probably didn't know was that Kate was pregnant. Seven months after he disappeared, on 11th April 1938, Kate gave birth to a baby girl who she called Mamie. At a compensation hearing in Ballina District Court the following year, Kate was awarded £225 and Mamie £375.

Kate unfortunately died a young woman in Castlebar Hospital in 1948. As for Mamie, she married Charlie Murray in London and had eight children.

In 2010, over seventy years after her father's disappearance, Mamie finally got to visit Blackrock for herself, courtesy of Irish Lights. She was accompanied by her son, radio presenter Cathal Murray, and a short radio documentary was made of the visit, entitled "*Good Day at Blackrock.*"

"It's been a personal ambition of mine, bordering on an obsession since I was twelve," says Cathal in the documentary, *"because every summer, we holidayed in Blacksod,*

where my mother was born. Myself and my brother would sit on the beach and every twelve seconds, the red light from Blackrock would go off."

During the moving documentary, Mamie threw a bunch of flowers into the sea from the spot where the father she never knew had disappeared. An aching ballad accompanies the piece, an abridged version of which is reproduced here: -

Good people all, both great and small, I pray ye will attend
and listen to these mournful lines that I have lately penned
concerning Patrick Monaghan all in his youth and bloom.
At the age of seven and twenty years, he met an early doom.

In 1937, when the angry sea devore,
he was assistant at Blackrock, some twelve miles from the shore
'Twas duty called, he did obey, to Blackrock he did repair.
He little thought that death's cold hand was waiting for him there.

On the seventeenth day of September, in that eventful year,
though his return was overdue, for him they held no fear.
The storm it raged for many a day and the sea went mountains high
No loving hand was there to save, no friend was standing by.

Oh Lord, what grief and sorrow did his young wife's heart surround,
when the doleful news, it came to Glosh, that Patrick dear was drowned.
All her brown hair in grief she'd tore, in anguish wrung her hands,
for it was but five short months before, they'd joined in wedlock band.

Their union was an unhappy one, this young man and his bride,
and sad to say, the hand of fate has torn him from her side.
His body it was never found, it lies beneath the waves.
No stone to mark his resting place, no shamrock on his grave.

His relatives now mourn his loss, their hearts are filled with woe.
He'll be remembered by them all as seasons come and go.
But we pray to God in heaven above their sorrows to allay,
all for poor Patrick Monaghan who was drowned in Blacksod Bay.

Sources:
Belfast Telegraph 21st September 1937
Evening Herald 21st September 1937
Irish Press 23rd September 1937 and others
Connaught Telegraph 2nd October 1937
Western People 9th July 1938 and others
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Mayo News 28th March 2017
Correspondence with Cathal Murray

The *Isolda* Light tender

Irish Lights tender Isolda

"Not a little interest was attached to the launching of the Irish Lights steamer Isolda*. As one dear old lady remarked, 'It was beautiful to see her sliding down on her keel! – but rather dangerous, don't you think?'"*

So began an *Irish Independent* article on Saturday 28th January 1928 on the launching of Irish Lights' newest addition to the force, the steam tender, *Isolda*.

The author of the article was not a journalist but a maritime man who occasionally contributed articles of a nautical nature to the newspapers. As one of the fortunate survivors of the *RMS Lusitania* in 1916, he was well versed in ships, boats and the perils of life at sea. Little did Albert Arthur Bestic realise at the time that not only was he present at the launch of the *Isolda* but he would also be captain of her at her demise almost thirteen years later.

On 19th December 1941, over fifteen months into WW2, the *Isolda* was undertaking reliefs on the south-east coast of Ireland. She had left Rosslare at 8.50am to visit the Barrels and the Coningbeg lightships in a clear blue sky. In addition to her crew of 28, she carried six lightshipmen to be landed on the lightships for Christmas. Spirits were good and many thoughts were of being back in Dun Laoghaire in time for the festivities. For six of the crew, that would be a false hope.

Fireman Patrick Shortt (left) and Coxswain Patrick Dunne, both killed on the Isolda
(Photographs courtesy Susan Gillard and Leslie Dunne Wissel respectively)

At around 10.45 am, the notorious Saltee Islands lay three miles on their starboard beam and Mr. O'Heir, the Third Officer on the bridge, sent the messenger boy, D. Byrne, to tell Captain Bestic that there was an unidentified plane in the area. On the way, Byrne met Chief Steward Holland, who told him to return to the bridge and he (Holland) would deliver the message to the captain, which he did.

Although the ship was in neutral waters and Bestic did not foresee any danger, nevertheless he hurried to the bridge to be on the safe side. The plane, a German Heinkel 111, was cruising along the starboard side of the *Isolda*, not fifty feet above the water, and Bestic realised that it was checking to see if the ship was armed.

The plane then circled around the bow of the ship to the port side and, with the sun behind it, came roaring in. Its intentions were now unmistakable. As one, the occupants of the bridge dived into the 'funkhole,' a concrete, bullet-proof shelter that had been erected for just such an emergency.

In the funkhole, the occupants heard two loud thuds, followed, five seconds later, by a loud explosion which seemed to lift the ship a foot out of the water.

Barely had the shock of the impact begun to wear off when the roar of the plane's engines told those on board that it was coming in for another attack. Another perfect strike and another loud explosion. The ship *'jumped like a wounded animal'* and immediately listed to starboard. Steam escaped from the engine room and great plumes of smoke darkened the pale blue sky.

"*Abandon ship*!" the cry went up and men immediately sprang to the boats and began to lower them. Realising that the ship's propellors were dangerously close to the descending lifeboats, Second Engineer Richard Best courageously went back to stop the engines.

On deck, Coxswain Patrick Dunne, A.B Seaman Patrick Farrell and Chief Steward William Holland had lowered one of the boats. The ship's cook, P. Burke told William Holland to hurry up and get in.

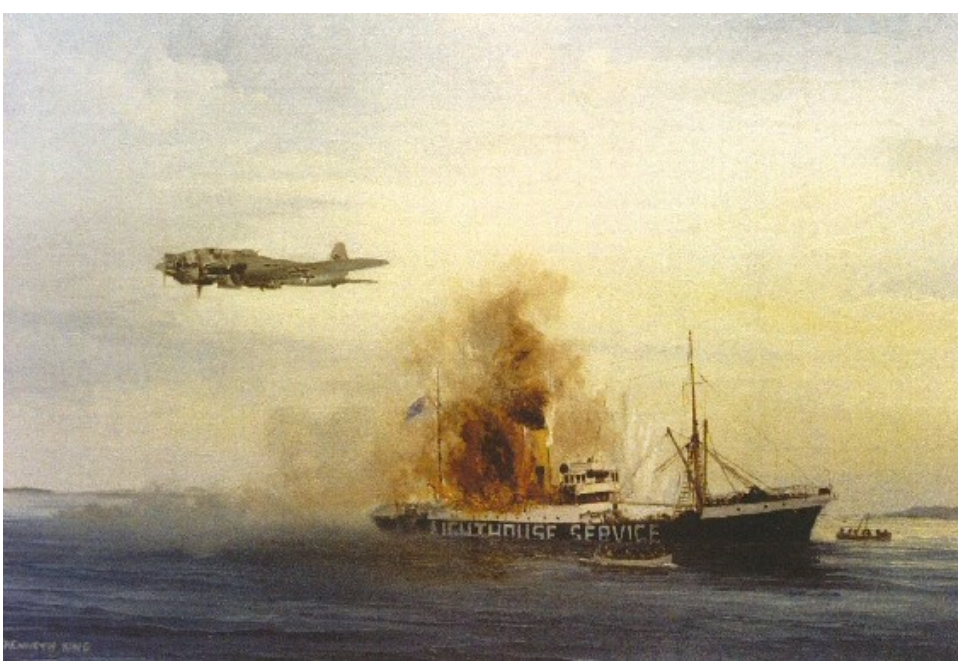
"*You go ahead, Paddy, I'll be fine*," Holland answered and the three men moved on to help lower the second boat. The bomb killed all three.

After roughly ten minutes, they heard the now familiar roar of aeroplane engines and realised that the Heinkel was coming in for a third sally. Everybody took whatever cover was offered and waited for the third explosion. When it came, the ship listed even further over on her starboard side.

Richard Best was badly injured in the explosion and was lying on the deck badly concussed. He was only saved from certain death by Chief Officer Thornton who picked him up and practically threw him over the side, where he was picked up by one of the boats. The body of Patrick Shortt was also seen lying on deck at this point, while good pals William Rushby and Jimmy Hayden were possibly killed in a lifeboat.

Once again, men scrambled to the boats and tumbled in, lowering them furiously. On the bridge, the men (and boy) were preparing to follow when they heard the plane approaching a fourth time. This time it was coming in from the bow directly over the length of the ship. They dived for the funkhole once more and were nearly deafened by the sound of two giant explosions one just in front of the bridge, one just behind.

Stumbling out onto the deck, half-blinded by steam and smoke, the men on the bridge saw some shipmates in two boats sitting away from the ship. One of these was the motorboat that the doomed ship had been towing and which was used for reliefs. The *Isolda* seemed as though it might go down at any moment and, were one of the boats to approach, it could have been sucked down into the vortex. Quickly they lowered the one remaining boat and clambered in. To their horror, they immediately realised that the boat had been damaged in the attacks and was taking water very quickly. In addition to this, due to the list, the ship's funnel was now hanging precariously over their heads.



Kenneth King's famous painting of the sinking of the Isolda

Keen eyes in the motorboat however had spotted the small party in the water and they immediately came to their rescue. Abandoning their leaking bucket, they started swimming away from the ship and were quickly picked up. A roll-call discovered that six of the crew were missing, presumed killed, while seven were wounded.

Leaving behind the sinking ship, the motorboat turned and, taking the other boat in tow, headed for Kilmore Quay, the nearest possible landing place on the Wexford coast, where the wounded received immediate attention.

There has been much made ever since that the *Isolda* was not a legitimate target as Ireland was a neutral country and the attack was a wartime atrocity on an unarmed, non-combatant ship. Over time, reports have stated that the word 'EIRE' was painted on the sides in white, six-foot-high letters and that she clearly flew the Irish flag.

Irish lightships and indeed Irish Lights themselves, have always acted under the jurisdiction of Trinity House in London. Historically, due to this, lightships and light tenders have always flown the Union flag. When independence was gained, Irish ships began to be registered in Dublin but the Union flag was still flown.

Ironically, after the sinking of the *Isolda*, the vessels were then registered in Liverpool, rather than Dublin. This allowed them to carry guns in case of a similar attack, as they were not allowed to arm themselves if registered in Ireland.

Amazingly, this was only changed in 1972, when Irish Lights' boats were again registered in Dublin and, for the first time, flew the Irish flag.

The Germans were in no doubt that the *Isolda* was a legitimate target due to her flying the Union flag. They may also have seen the buoys on her deck and assumed she was laying mines as part of the war effort. Pertinently, the Irish government did not put in a claim for reparations as they did on other occasions when bombs mistakenly fell on Ireland.

Due to wartime reporting restrictions, it was not until hostilities ceased that news of the sinking was made public.

Those killed on the Isolda, all native to or residing in or near Dun Laoghaire, were:

- Coxswain Patrick Dunne, aged 46, first appointed Seaman aboard the Irish Light Vessel (ILV) *Tearagh*t on 1st January 1925, joined the *Isolda* as Coxswain on 1st November 1932, with an address of 7, Sallynoggin Villas, Dun Laoghaire.
- Seaman Patrick Farrell, aged 24, with an address of 18, Clarinda Park West, Dun Laoghaire. Son of Patrick and Anne Farrell.
- Fireman John James Hayden, aged 38, first appointed fireman on the *Isolda* on 1st July 1932 with an address of Beaufort House, Sandycove Rd., Dun Laoghaire.
- Chief Steward William Holland, aged 58, first appointed cook on the *Tearaght* on 5th February 1904, made Steward on 1st August 1915. Joined the *Isolda* in 1928, with an address of 7, Sussex St., Dun Laoghaire.
- Leading Fireman William Rushby, aged 43, appointed fireman on the ILV *Tearaght* on 1st September 1923, joined the *Isolda* as Leading Fireman on 1st July 1932, with an address of 37, Carriglea Gardens, Dun Laoghaire.
- Fireman Patrick Shortt, aged 44, first appointed as fireman on the ILV *Alexandra* on 1st December 1927, joined the *Isolda* as Fireman on 1st September 1928 with an address of O'Byrne Rd, Bray.

The injured were:

- Second Engineer Richard Best
- Assistant Cook T. Burke
- Lightshipman J. Gaul
- Carpenter S. Guy
- Fireman J. Jackson
- Chief-Engineer T. J. Scott-White

Panel 122 at the Mercantile Marine Memorial in Tower Hill, London

Sources:
Evening Herald 26th January 1928
Irish Independent 28th January 1928
Irish Independent 19th December 1945
Irish Independent 26th June 1946
Wicklow People 25th March 1993 and others
Belfast Telegraph 5th May 2005
Coast Monkey 19th December 2019
National Maritime Museum lecture by Elleesa Rushby, granddaughter of William
Communication with Susan Gillard and Ken Bash, family members

Patrick Scanlan, Tuskar Rock

Patrick Scanlan, like most born on Scattery Island, had seawater for blood and there was never any doubt that his chosen path in life would be a maritime one. His mother was a born and bred Scattery Islander, while his father was a pilot – later a master pilot – who joined ships entering the Shannon estuary and guided them down the treacherous waterway to Limerick.

As soon as he was old enough, Patrick junior applied to Irish Lights for a position and he was sent up to Oyster Island as assistant keeper. Oyster Island lies off Rosses Point in county Sligo and is regarded as a comparatively quiet posting, despite the fact that there were several lights to be tended at the station. It was here that Patrick got married and had six children, four girls and two boys. Around 1935, Patrick and his family were transferred to the Tuskar Rock.

Both Oyster Island and Tuskar Rock are offshore islands but there the similarity ends. Oyster Island is a green and tranquil place, a few hundred yards across from lively Rosses Point, with dwellings for the keeper and his family on it and plenty of space for the children. Tuskar is a barren rock, seven miles off the south-east corner of Rosslare and subject to tremendous seas that sweep in from the Atlantic. The families of the keepers, in Patrick Scanlan's time, lived in accommodation overlooking the busy port of Rosslare on the mainland.

The port of Rosslare with the keepers' shore dwellings behind on the brow of the hill

World War Two began in 1939 and Ireland, despite her neutrality, became embroiled in the conflict when not only the British and the Germans but in some cases the Irish deemed it expedient to place mines around our coastlines. While we were not directly targeted (the principal prey were British ships and German U-Boats) the blasted things kept breaking loose and floating around on the vagaries of the tide, putting the fear of God into every local fishing boat that strayed too near.

In 1941, a floating mine beached at Cullenstown Strand in county Wexford and four members of the local security force were killed when it was accidentally detonated. At the end of the year, on Tuesday 2nd December, another floating mine, shiny and spherical and possibly of British origin was spotted approaching the Tuskar Rock lighthouse.

On the rock that night were lightkeepers Peter Roddy from county Louth, William J. Cahill, from The Faythe, Wexford and Patrick Scanlan.

"We had been anxiously watching the mine for a couple of hours," said Roddy. *"It drifted closer and closer but we were powerless."*

It had been Patrick Scanlon earlier in the evening who had first spotted the object that would kill him a few hours later. He had been on duty up in the lantern when he caught a glimpse of the tell-tale semi-circle bobbing about roughly thirty yards from the island. It was low tide and the large mine was practically stationary. He was well aware of the danger that it posed and he informed his two colleagues of its presence.

At 10pm, Peter Roddy relieved Patrick Scanlan in the lantern room and the latter went down to the living quarters at the base of the tower. He looked for the mine and nervously noticed it was beginning to come closer. By 11.15pm, he saw in the moonlight that it was a mere two yards off the rock. In a panic, he hurriedly descended to the service room ten feet below the lantern.

"I had barely reached the service room," he said, *"when the explosion occurred. It was a terrific crash. The lighthouse appeared to lift and the whole of the glass of the lantern came in.*

'Lots of stones from the rock crashed in, followed by the sea. The water had been lifted in a towering quantity, 110 feet from sea level and it poured into the lighthouse. All the lights went out; the place was plunged in darkness."

The explosion was heard up to twelve miles away. In the lightkeepers' dwellings in Rosslare, fourteen-year-old Patrick Scanlan – destined to become a lightkeeper himself – heard it, as did many hundreds of others. The first suspicion was that the fuel tanks for the lighthouse had somehow ignited.

At the base of the lighthouse, all was carnage. Peter Roddy, who had been blown over in the service room and was half-dazed, managed to get to his feet and slowly groped his way down the steps in the smoke-filled pitch blackness. Reaching the bottom, he found masonry, doors, bricks and ceilings piled up in a tangled heap. In the kitchen, he found William Cahill, badly concussed, bathing a head wound.

He went into the living-room and heard a moan. Quickly he located the Morse signalling lamp and went back to the bombsite of a living quarters.

"After climbing about on the debris, I saw Mr. Scanlon's face above the heap," he said. *"It was a mass of blood from the eyes, mouth and ears. His body was buried in the debris. I freed him and brought him into the kitchen. He was unconscious and all smashed up."*

It was later surmised that the unfortunate lightkeeper had just opened the door at the base of the lighthouse to go and check on the position of the mine when it exploded. He would have caught the full force of the blast which threw him back inside the building.

Patrick and Mary Scanlan (photograph courtesy Pam Wilson via Dermot Scanlan)

Roddy then signalled to the Rosslare lifeboat that help was needed urgently and Martin O'Rourke, the coxswain, and his crew sped out to the stricken light. The two badly injured men were laid on blankets and, with great difficulty, carried by the lifeboat crew over the slippery rocks and into the lifeboat. Peter Roddy refused to leave his post and lifeboatman Wickham volunteered to remain with him.

On the lifeboat's arrival back in Rosslare, it was met by members of the Red Cross, the Army Medical Corps, nurses and a doctor. For Patrick Scanlan, it was too late and he died shortly after his arrival on the mainland. The cause of death was later ascertained to be a fractured skull.

William Cahill was rushed to hospital with head injuries, where he remained for three weeks.

The following day, the lifeboat went back out to the Tuskar and picked up Roddy and Wickham and brought them back to the mainland. That night was the first in 126 years where there had been no human presence on the tiny rock.

Due to unfavourable weather conditions, the Irish Lights tender, *Ierne*, was prevented for nearly three weeks from landing men and supplies onto the rock to make repairs. Repairs were estimated in the region of £1,000, mainly to the living

quarters, while above in the lantern, it was broken glass that caused the most damage. Eventually, the tender managed to get in and on January 3rd, 1942 the light shone again.

Martin O'Rourke and the lifeboat crew were called out again precisely one week after the Tuskar explosion. This time it was to save the lives of eleven of the crew of the Liverpool steamer '*Gertie*,' which sunk near the Tuskar Rock.

It had hit a floating mine.

The Tuskar Rock lighthouse. The larger of the two white blocks in front of the tower contains the front door of the lighthouse. The mine apparently floated into the little bay just behind the pier and exploded below the front door. If it had hit any other part of the rock, Patrick Scanlan would probably have survived.

Sources:
Irish Examiner 4th December 1941 and others
Irish Independent 4th December 1941 and others
Irish Press 4th December 1941
Kerry Champion 6th December 1941 and others
Southern Star 3rd January 1942
Waterford News and Star 19th December 1941 and others
Communication with Warren Buckley and Jodie Williams, family

Richie Power, Mew Island

The tragedy of Richie Power was not that he was young (which he was) or that he was inexperienced (which he wasn't) but simply that he was a stranger in town. If he had only safely negotiated the first few days on Mew Island, there was no reason why he shouldn't have lived long into old age.

The Copeland Islands mark the southern approach to Belfast Lough and, historically, were one of the earliest sites of a lighthouse proper on the coast of Ireland. The first two lighthouses were built on another of the islands, which became known as Lighthouse Island (it would have been quite presumptive to have named the island before building a lighthouse on it!), a tower light replacing an older cottage-style lighthouse.

It was decided in the 1870s that the position of the light was not really the best and the smaller Mew Island would be preferable. After an inordinate amount of time, even by Irish Lights standards, discussing the logistics and design, the new light was eventually established in 1884, along with five shore dwellings at Donaghadee.

Aerial view of the lighthouse from the 1930s. Notice the three disused gasometers in the yard. The lighthouse was painted black until 1954 when it gained a white band. (Photograph copyright estate of Eileen Kates, used by permission.)

The fog signal used was gas-operated, as was the light, and it was part of the lightkeepers' duties to produce the gas themselves. This was done by burning coal, the gas produced being stored in two, later three, circular gasometers, each twenty-five feet in diameter and with a 46,000 cubic foot capacity. They were sunk into the ground. In 1928, the gas-making plant, the last still being used around the coast of Ireland, was discontinued.

Twenty-two years later, young Richie Power arrived at Mew Island as an S.A.K. (Supernumerary Assistant Keeper). He was a Corkman from Castletownbere, where his father and mother ran a pub in the west part of the town. Three of his brothers worked in Irish Lights. James (Jimmy) was a lightkeeper at the Bull Rock; Thomas worked as a lightkeeper at the Old Head of Kinsale; and Eddie worked on the Irish Lights tenders. And, therefore, it was not unimaginable that Richie should also choose the lighthouse service for a profession.

Like most S.A.K.s, he did his training at the Baily Lighthouse in Howth, from where he was transferred as a temporary keeper, as the need arose. If a keeper needed time off for family reasons or was taken ill, Irish Lights would sometimes employ a local, temporary keeper to cover (as per Patrick Monaghan in Blackrock in 1937) or send one of their newer recruits who hadn't yet been given a permanent post.

Richie fell into the latter category. He was 22 years old and was well trained in all aspects of his lightkeeping duties. He had already served as a S.A.K. at various stations around the coast and Mew Island was simply another station along the road to getting a permanent post. He travelled up to Donaghadee and caught the relief boat over to the island on Friday 10th March 1950.

All went well until around 8.30pm on the following Tuesday. Richie was with John James Scott, the principal keeper, in the mess room, while the other assistant keeper, Johnny Connell, a very proficient model-maker, was on duty up at the lantern. P.K. Scott had to go to the fog signal room (it was a very foggy night) and when he returned, there was no sign of Richie. He had gone to get fresh water from a tap out in the gas-yard. Scott looked out into the yard and whistled and called out "*Richard*" several times but without any response. There was a small light emanating from the engine room which was used for charging batteries and there was also a bit of reflection from the lantern above but otherwise the place was in total darkness.

Worried now, he called to Johnny Connell and, armed with an electric inspection lamp, they searched the gas-yard more thoroughly. It was then that he noticed something white in the water of one of the gasometers which appeared to be an arm. He touched it and realised that it was a body. The two men hauled Richie out of the gasometer and attempted artificial respiration, but it was no use.

The lightkeepers knew to stay on the path and not to stray off it at night for fear of falling into the gasometer but nobody had got around to telling Richie this. Before we point fingers, we must remember that this was 1950 and the concept of Health and Safety was not even a dream in somebody's consciousness. Accidents were a way of life.

"*That's just how it was,*" said Richie's younger brother, Davy, speaking in 2020. "*These things happened and you just got on with it. It wouldn't happen these days, of course, with all the health and safety around but in those days …*"

The disused gasometers were sunk into the ground, so their tops were level with the yard. There was about twenty-seven inches of water in the one that Richie fell into and plenty of pipes for him to cling onto or stand on but it appeared that, from the small wound and abrasions on his right temple, he must have tripped and hit his head before falling unconscious down into the water. There were also small marks on his lip and right elbow.

The bucket was hooked over Richie's arm and an open packet of cigarettes was found nearby, leading to the supposition that he had stopped to light a cigarette on the way to fetch the water and somehow tripped or slipped into the gasometer.

P.K. Scott obviously had no telephone or radio contact with the mainland and therefore sent out distress flares but, due to the foggy weather, these were not seen for a considerable amount of time. Eventually, the lifeboat put out from Donaghadee at 3am and a smaller boat carried the body into the harbour. From there it was transferred to Ards Hospital.

"The police from the barracks in Castletown came down and told us the news at nine o'clock the next morning," said Davy. *"It was a terrible shock but what can you do?"*

At the Coroner's Court in Newtownards on Thursday 16th, death by asphyxiation due to drowning was recorded and it was recommended to Irish Lights that some sort of protection should be placed around the gasometers to avoid a repetition of the tragic incident. Captain E.C. Thornton, Assistant Inspector of Irish Lights, agreed to bring the recommendation back to the board.

Meanwhile, brother Tom at the Old Head of Kinsale had been informed of the news and made his way home for the funeral which had been scheduled for Friday. However, in the meantime. a heavy sea had rolled in and brother Jimmy, offshore at the Bull Rock lighthouse, was left stranded as the relief boat could not safely land. The funeral was delayed, allowing Jimmy time to be relieved, but the weather was unrelenting and the service went ahead on the Saturday without him.

Richie Power was laid to rest at St. Finian's cemetery, Berehaven.

Richie's final resting place

Sources:
Belfast Telegraph 7th March 1950
Evening Echo 15th March 1950
Northern Whig and others 17th March 1950
Conversations with brother Davy Power, Kevin O'Byrne and Sarah O'Byrne

David O'Byrne, Fanad Head

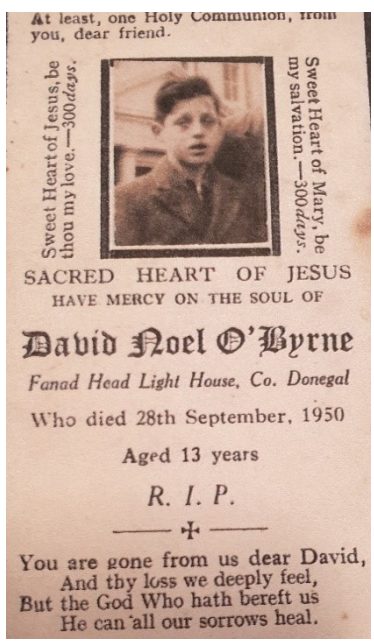
Fifty years on from Frank Maguire's unfortunate slip over the cliff edge at Fanad Head in 1900 *(see page 119),* that same stretch of rough pathway between the lighthouse and what is now the attendant's cottage would claim another life.

On the afternoon of a rainswept Thursday 28th September 1950, David Noel O'Byrne, the thirteen-year-old son of Principal Keeper David O'Byrne was sent on an errand by his mother, Margaret, to go and get some potatoes. Depending on the newspaper you read, these potatoes were either in a field 600 yards away or in the nearby village of Arraheeragh. It is also possible that the field was in the village.

David O'Byrne was five feet tall and had brown hair and grey eyes. His front teeth were chipped and he sported a noticeable scar on his right knee. When he left the house with a bucket for the potatoes, he was wearing a blue jersey, blue dungarees and rubber boots. The last person to see him alive was his brother Patrick, aged nine.

There are two ways to reach nearby Arraheeragh (multitudinous spellings) which is situated in the environs of today's Lighthouse Tavern. One is by the only road from the lighthouse, a slightly longer, meandering route. The other is the short cut across the cliff top to Ned McKinley's old cottage and, from there, a rough dirt track joins up with the road at Arraheeragh. As he had doubtless done many times, David chose the latter and was never seen again. To this day, the family are not 100% sure what happened to him.

Searches on land and at sea were coordinated by the local Gardaí and RTE broadcast an S.O.S. asking him to contact home, in the hope that maybe he was alive somewhere. As time wore on, hope gradually disappeared. The general consensus was that the same thing had happened to him as had happened to Frank Maguire, fifty years previously – he had slipped or stumbled and gone over the edge.


At least, one Holy Communion, from you, dear friend.

Sweet Heart of Jesus, be thou my love.—300 *days.*

Sweet Heart of Mary, be my salvation.—300 *days.*

SACRED HEART OF JESUS
HAVE MERCY ON THE SOUL OF

David Noel O'Byrne

Fanad Head Light House, Co. Donegal

Who died 28th September, 1950

Aged 13 years

R. I. P.

✠

You are gone from us dear David,
And thy loss we deeply feel,
But the God Who hath bereft us
He can all our sorrows heal.

David O'Byrne, photograph and memorial card

About a year later, David O'Byrne, senior, and his family were transferred to the lighthouse at St. John's Point, county Down. In February 1953, steel netting was erected around the lighthouse to prevent children from straying over the cliff top.

Today a granite memorial to David O'Byrne stands at the entrance to Fanad lighthouse. It was unveiled at a service attended by David's siblings and other family members in weather similar to that of the day he disappeared fifty years previously.

His widowed mother, Margaret, died peacefully in a Belfast nursing home a few hours later.

David O'Byrne's memorial at Fanad (photograph courtesy Bernadette Hopkins)

Sources:
Irish Independent 3rd October 1950
Derry Journal 6th October 1950
Donegal News 7th October 1950
Derry Journal 2nd February 1951
Donegal News 7th March 1953
Conversations with Kevin O'Byrne and Sarah O'Byrne

Seamus Rohu, Skellig Michael

A posting to either of the lighthouse stations on the monastic island of Skellig Michael, off the coast of Kerry, in the nineteenth century was not without hazard. Not that it was, in itself, any more dangerous than other island stations but it seemed that bad things happened there.

As documented elsewhere in this book, a workman was blown up while helping to build the narrow stone roadway around the island; one of the keepers went over the cliff while fetching grass for his cow; two cousins of the Redmond family both died, at least one of whom fell over a cliff; and the two young Callaghan children both died of natural causes there in the 1860s.

However, since the last incident, the island seemed to have behaved itself. The upper light was abandoned when Inishtearaght was established in 1870 and the families were removed to Knightstown on the mainland. There were a few near squeaks but the island appears to have remained death-free for almost ninety years.

The Rohu family is another one of those lightkeeping dynasties whose name keeps cropping up whenever lightkeepers are mentioned, possibly more so than others due to the unusual surname. (The family hailed from Brittany and the mayor of the town of Plouharnel, one Bonaventure Marie Rohu, was forced to flee his native land during the French Revolution. One of his sons, John Vincent Rohu settled in Ireland and began a dynasty of seafarers, coastguards and lightkeepers.)

James Alphonsus (Seamus) Rohu was born in Bangor, county Down on 8th February 1928. His brother Edward was a lightkeeper, as was his uncle Alf and cousin Gerard and so it was not surprising that, at the age of eighteen, he joined Irish Lights. After serving time at the Baily lighthouse in Dublin, he was transferred, on 6th June 1951, to the ancient lighthouse at Loop Head, county Clare as assistant keeper. During this time, he married one Elizabeth (Lily) McCurdy from Rathlin Island.

Seamus was an accomplished accordion player and loved music. He was also very proficient at sketching portraits and figures.

On 24th April 1953, he was transferred to Skellig Michael and Lily moved into one of the lightkeepers' houses just outside of Knightstown, which were also occupied by the families of keepers on Inishtearaght. Their first child, Anna Maria (Anna) was born here shortly after their arrival. Another child, Gerald Martin, arrived in 1955.

In 1954, the three keepers on the rock, Gillan, Rohu and Leenane could not be relieved for Christmas and were without any festive fare on "*Lonely Island*" as the *Evening Echo* headlined it.

From Valentia Island, the craggy island of Skellig Michael looms hazily from the ocean depths and it is said that, when Seamus was on the rock, he and Lily used to signal each other with a mirror that would send a flash of light from one to the other. Or so the story was related later. The logistics of such an arrangement would be difficult to manage. Both parties would have had a fair walk to reach points on their respective islands where they were in sight of one another, Lily with two small children in tow. And, of course, the sun would need to be shining at the time. It is difficult to see how this could be pre-arranged before Seamus started a tour of duty.

In the second week of August 1956, Seamus began what he believed to be his last tour of duty on Skellig Michael, for word had come through from on high that he was

to be transferred back to a shore station at St. John's Point after his current spell on the rock was completed.

Lily Rohu nee McCurdy (Photograph courtesy Anna Delargy)

Ten days into his stint, Tuesday 21st August was a decent enough day, though a swell was building. (The date has been wrongly identified in some sources as being Monday 21st or Tuesday 22nd, for some reason.) A Cahirciveen fishing trawler, with several tourists on board, approached the rock but could not land. Seamus, along with head keeper Eugene Gillan and Assistant Keeper Harry Staniforth were acutely aware that the weather would only disimprove. At around, 12.30pm, Eugene Gillan asked Seamus to go and store some ropes in the rope house near the landing stage, a short distance away.

Seamus did not return immediately but this was not unusual. He could have been having a smoke or simply walking along the roadway. There was a suggestion too that he might have gone to check the lobster pots which the keepers hauled up and down with the mast of a yacht. When, however, he hadn't returned by 2pm, the two keepers decided they would go and look for him. However, although an extensive search of the island was undertaken, no sign of Seamus was to be seen.

"*The rope store is the first shed you'll meet, about fifty yards from the usual landing place,*" says Des Lavelle. "*It is concrete-built and its purpose in lighthouse times was just that - storing ropes for use at the landing. The OPW still use it.*

'A very high and long swell from the SW can mount the roadside uphill of this shed and pour back in a torrent. Lighthouse men would be well aware of this phenomenon, and I'm confident that no one would venture down there in such circumstances. But we hear stories of 'freak waves' in many places…"

Seamus with daughter Anna (Photograph courtesy Anna Delargy) Anna is now a grandmother living in North Queensland, "My Dad is never far from my mind," she says. "Even though I'm 67 now, I miss him so. I think that's because his body was never found, and I always was looking and waiting for him to come home."

A wireless telephone had been installed on the island and, using this, Gillan alerted the station at Mizen Head, further down the coast, that Seamus was missing. Mizen were able to contact Valentia Island and the lifeboat there, with a crew of nine under coxswain, Jeremiah O'Connell, arrived at the rock at between 6pm and 7pm. As it was summer, and still bright, they were able to do several circumnavigations of the island before night fell, in the hope that maybe Seamus was clinging to a rock or a ledge somewhere near the water level. They continued the search throughout the night using searchlights.

As dawn broke, the Irish Lights tender *Valonia*, which had been in Castletownbere, joined the search, landing temporary keeper Arthur Linnane on the rock as a provisional replacement. Seamus' brother, Edward, who had been stationed on the Maidens in county Down, made the long trip down to county Kerry. An inspector, Captain Henry Ball, was sent down by Irish Lights. The search resumed on land and on sea for two further days but no trace of the twenty-eight-year-old father of two was ever found and the reason for his disappearance remains a mystery to this day.

Irish Lights were very sorry but the house in Knightstown was needed for the replacement keeper, so Lily and her two young children had to move out. At a compensation hearing eleven months later, at which Lily was awarded £634 and the two children £10 per week until they reached the age of sixteen, they were living at an address in Cappagh, Kilrush, county Clare. They later moved up to Ballycastle opposite Rathlin Island, where Lily had brothers and sisters.

Seamus Rohu
(Photograph courtesy Anna Delargy)

Anna visited Skellig Michael in 2002. *"I didn't climb the steps,"* she says. *"I just sat down and got so much comfort knowing I was sitting where my dad would have climbed past many, many times."*

Sources:
Irish Press 22nd August 1956 and others
Irish Independent 22nd August 1956 and others
Irish Examiner 23rd August 1956 and others
Lighthouse Digest Magazine August 2002
Correspondence with daughter Anna Delargy

William Furlong, Rathlin West

Lighthouse map of Rathlin Island. The dwellings for the keepers' families were at the East lighthouse

Rathlin Island lies a good 45-minute boat journey from the harbour of Ballycastle, county Antrim, practically within touching distance of the incredibly long Kintyre peninsula of southwest Scotland. It is an L-shaped island and features three lighthouses (four if you count the double lighthouse at Altacarry Head) at each point of the L.

The Atlantic Ocean travels thousands of miles from the Americas before it hits Ireland, where it splits up. One section travels along the south coast of Ireland, after which it splits up again, some going up the Irish Sea, the rest continuing along the English Channel and up into the North Sea.

The other section travels up the west coast of Ireland where it too splits up, half travelling up the west coast of Scotland to meet up with itself at the Pentland Firth, and the other half diverting around the north coast of Ireland, where it too meets up with its brother in the north Irish Sea. Thus, Rathlin Island, like the Pentland Firth at the tip of mainland Scotland, is located where two seas collide and many a shipwreck has occurred at both places.

The ferry arrives at the inside corner of the L on Rathlin. The East lighthouse, the first on the island, is located directly ahead as you alight, up the gentle hill to Altacarry Head and the reputed cave where Robert the Bruce hid out with his arachnid friend. Rue Point, the South lighthouse, is easily walkable and is located at

the end of the shorter spar of the L, heading back southwards towards the Irish mainland.

The West lighthouse is a little bit further (four miles) and a minibus awaits the ferry in the summer months to bring the visitor along the longer spar of the L to its western extremity. It is a famous bird watching sanctuary with seabirds occupying every ledge of its vertical cliffs during the breeding season and people tend to visit for the puffins rather than the lighthouse, which is something of a curiosity.

Because the cliffs are so high, there was no need to build the lantern on top of the tower. Instead, it is located on a concrete platform set into the cliff, behind which rises the sixty-feet square tower. Only when viewed from the sea can its spectacular setting be truly appreciated.

The upside-down Rathlin West lighthouse, with the light at the base of the tower (Photograph Sue McBean)

The cliffs behind the lighthouse are dark and the lighthouse is painted white in contrast. As it is often lashed by wind and salt spray, it needs painting on a regular basis and it was on this task that William Furlong and James 'Austin' Brady had been working in May 1957.

The two painters were Dublin men, Austin from Carnlough Road in Cabra on the north side and William from Windmill Road in Crumlin on the south side of the city, both large working-class areas. They were employed by Irish Lights as painters and, as such, had been stationed at different locations around the coast as required. They had been working on Rathlin since January.

On May 24th, William was painting the window surrounds at the top of the tower above the cement yard. The modus operandum for painting windows was to sit on the inside of the sill, with legs inside, when painting the lower sashes and to stand on the outside sill when painting the upper sashes.

A cradle had been rigged up under the supervision of Principal Keeper William (Freddie) James to paint the outside walls but, as he testified at the inquest, he had never, in his 26 years in the service, known painters to use the cradle for painting windows. Austin Brady said that it would be possible to paint the top sashes without standing on the outside sill but it would be very awkward. Nowadays, of course, this would be unthinkable but Health and Safety hadn't been invented in 1957.

The other two keepers on duty at the time were Neil Joseph Loughrey and Paddy Keane. According to Neil's son, Nick, there was a possibility that one of the catches on the sashes came loose in William's hand as he climbed out to paint a patch he had missed and this may have caused the fall. It was the second window from the top, he believes. Neil and William got on very well together and the former said he remembered the vacant look in William's eyes as he lay on the ground and the helplessness of not being able to do anything for him.

P.K. James, at the inquest, said that he had been eating his dinner in the kitchen at the base of the tower when he heard a crash. He rushed outside and William was on the ground with blood flowing from his skull, having evidently fallen over fifty feet. A boat with a doctor and a police officer was summoned from Ballycastle on the mainland but it was too late. William died only ten minutes after the fall.

William Furlong (Photograph courtesy Jacinta O'Meara)

The body lay for a night in the island chapel before Requiem Mass was said the following morning and the islanders accompanied the coffin down to the jetty. William was buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery in Dublin.

William Furlong was 41 years old, married to Molly with five sons, Thomas (13), Brendan (12), James (9), Ronald (7) and Dermot (3). He was a good father who used to sing *'Good night, little children, good night'* to them at bedtime.

Molly Furlong was a small woman who now had to rear her five boys single-handedly in a tough estate. She later said she had no time to properly mourn her husband as she was so busy trying to keep the house going. She had to fight for everything and, although Irish Lights was a 32-county operation, the fact that her husband died in another jurisdiction made the legalities all the more difficult. An action for damages against Irish Lights, which was eventually settled without admission of liability, took more than a year to come to fruition.

William and Molly's headstone in Mount Jerome Cemetery, Dublin

Sources:

Evening Herald 25th May 1957
Irish Independent 25th May 1957
Ballymena Weekly Telegraph 30th May 1957
Belfast Telegraph 14th June 1957
Northern Whig and *Irish Press* 15th June 1957
Irish Examiner 19th July 1958
Communications with niece Jacinta O'Meara
Communication with Nick Loughrey, son of A.K. Neil Loughrey

George Edmonds, Coningbeg Lightship

From the *Evening Herald*, Saturday 4th February 1967

Died in Fall - A 30-year-old member of the crew of the Coningbeg Light vessel off the south coast of Wexford, was drowned last night when he fell overboard.

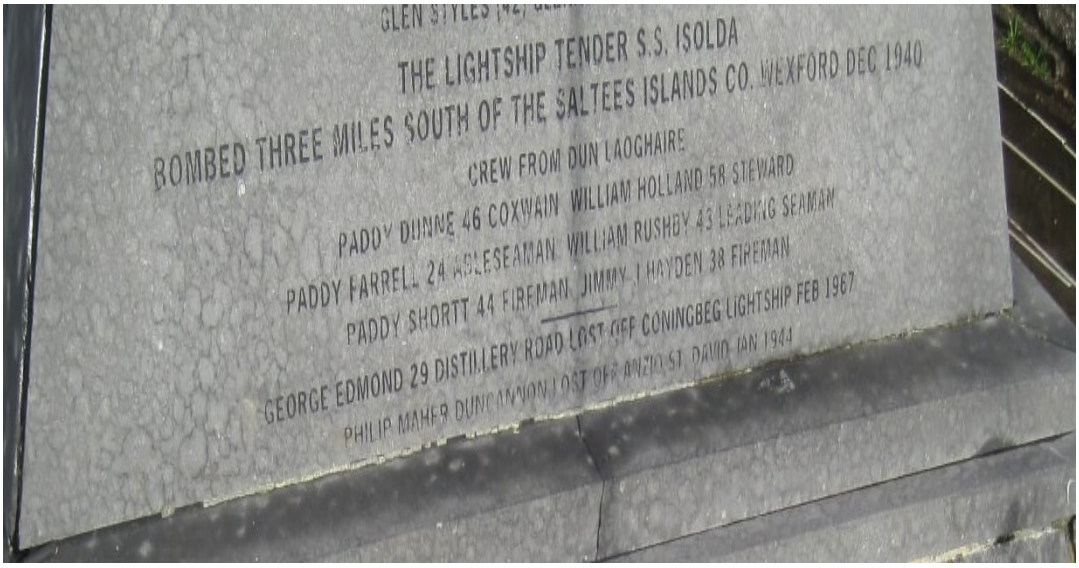
The dead man is called George Esmonde (sic)*, aged about 30 of Distillery Road, Wexford. Mr. Esmonde, who was married, had been stationed on the lightship in a temporary capacity and had been taken out from Rosslare Harbour only last Thursday. He was previously employed as a painter.*

From the *Evening Echo*, Tuesday 7th February 1967

Inquiry into death of Irish Lights man – Captain C. L'Estrange, Assistant Irish Lights Inspector, boarded the Irish Lights tender, Atlanta *in Cork today to be taken to the Coningbeg lightvessel eight miles off the south coast of Wexford.*

Captain L'Estrange will investigate the circumstances of the death of Mr. George Edmonds (29), a temporary member of the lightship's crew who fell overboard and was drowned last Friday night. Mr. Edmonds' body was brought ashore by Kilmore Quay lifeboat.

The Coningbeg station was the longest-running of Ireland's coastal lightship stations, having boasted a vessel there from 1824 to 2007.



In the Memorial Garden for those lost at sea at Kilmore Quay, George's name is transcribed as 'Edmond.'

Thomas Brannick and Peter Timmons, Wicklow Head

Old postcard of the three lighthouses on Wicklow Head, possibly 1940s. From the top, the old high light (1781), the new high light (1818) and the new low light (also 1818) Only the last-named is still operational.

It is a fact universally acknowledged that a building by the sea will require painting more than a building further inland. This is due to the saltwater spray whipped up by the wind and attacking the paintwork of coastal domiciles and lighthouses.

One may ask why there was a need to paint lighthouses at all. After all, the light only shone at night, when the physical appearance of the tower holding the light was immaterial because mariners could not actually see it. The sequence of the flash was what differentiated one lighthouse from all others in the vicinity, not the colour of the bands.

But the value of lighthouses was not restricted to the varying number of hours of darkness on any particular day. Ships unfamiliar with a coastline would use the lighthouses as daymarks and the colour schemes would assist them in pinpointing exactly where they were in the world. Many were painted white to stand out against the darker cliffs behind. Some had one band or two, of black or red; others were painted black to stand out against the sky.

Basically, painting was an essential part of maritime navigation and Irish Lights employed teams of (usually two) painters to give their seventy or so lighthouses a lick of paint when needed. One such team in the 1960s was Brannick and Timmons from opposite sides of the River Liffey in Dublin.

Thomas Brannick was the older man of the two, at 66 years of age in 1967. He was married to Anne, had a grown-up family and had lived in York Road, Rathmines for many a year. He had once dived into the canal near Baggot Street Bridge to recover the body of a five-year-old boy who had slipped off the embankment.

Peter Timmons lived in Bannow Road in Cabra and was 52 years old. He had a wife, Molly, and a family of ten, ranging from nine to twenty-seven years old. He had

served his apprenticeship at Dockrells and had been with Irish Lights for around fifteen years. He had had a narrow escape ten years previously when a prefabricated building in the Hook Head lighthouse compound caught fire and he managed to scramble to safety with singed hair and burning clothes.

Over the few years prior to 1967, the two men had spent a lot of time together working on lighthouses in west Cork. They had painted the Bull Rock and Roancarrig and also Mizen Head and Crookhaven. On the 25th May 1967, the pair travelled to Wicklow to begin work painting the lighthouse and other buildings on Wicklow Head. Wicklow Head lies just south of Wicklow town and boasts three lighthouses and the foundations of a fourth, the chronology of which has confused and confounded many a maritime scholar down through the years.

There were two octagonal stone lighthouses established here in 1781, a high light and a low light. The reasons for the two lights were, themselves two-fold. Firstly, two lights would remove any possibility of confusion with Howth Head and Hook Head, which were both single lights. And secondly, the lights, kept in line, would lead boats through the narrow gap between two major sandbanks north and south of the Head.

Thomas Brannick with his wife Annie (Photograph courtesy Julie-Ann Brannick)

The problem was that, like so many of these early lights – Inis Mór, Cape Clear, Old Head of Kinsale, Howth etc. – the upper light was built too high and was often obscured by cloud or mist, rendering it completely useless. It was therefore decided to replace these two lighthouses with two lighthouses at a lower level but on the same line. And so, in 1818, the new lights were established, the high one practically on the location of the old lower light (which was demolished) and the low one further down the cliff. It is unclear why the old low lighthouse was not simply converted into the new high lighthouse. As it happened, the new high lighthouse was discontinued in 1865.

Therefore, in the second half of May 1967, Peter Timmons and Thomas Brannick rolled up to the lower lighthouse on Wicklow Head, doubtless pleased that they did

not have to paint the other two lighthouses they had just passed at the end of their journey. There were plenty of outbuildings and dwellings at the lower light, never mind the light tower itself, which would doubtless keep them occupied for a good while. Sadly, in two totally separate incidents, neither man would live to see the job completed.

On the morning of 25th May, Thomas Brannick did not rise for work as usual and one of the keepers went down to see where he was. Jim Cahill was principal keeper at the time and Brendan Conway was a temporary keeper. To his horror, the keeper found the 66-year-old man dead in the bed. The doctor was sent for and Irish Lights informed. Some members of the family travelled down. It was deduced that death had been from natural causes, a coronary thrombosis, and the body was transferred back up to Dublin for burial.

Unfortunately, time waits for no man and the lighthouse still had to be painted. Naturally, Peter could not do it on his own and he was short a workmate. His suggestion that his son George, then aged twenty, should be employed as a temporary replacement was accepted by Irish Lights and father and son got to work painting the lighthouse.

All went well until the evening of Thursday 22nd June, midsummer's day. The two men had spent the day working and were down on the rocks below the lighthouse doing a spot of fishing, along with a twelve-year-old boy, the son of one of the lightkeepers. For bait, they were using limpets banged from the rocks which they kept in a bait box out on the rock. At around 8.30pm, Peter, looking to replenish his supply of limpets, made for the bait box.

By this time, the tide was coming in and waves were washing over the rock. George had just called out to his father to leave it, as it was too dangerous, when suddenly Peter slipped down between two rocks and fell into the water.

George immediately rushed over to the spot where his father had disappeared and was relieved to find him splashing about in the water, although he was a non-swimmer. A non-swimmer himself, George held his fishing rod out and his father grasped it, only for it to come apart in his hands. He threw the ball of fishing line which his father also caught but this too broke in half.

Now quite panicked, George then turned around on the rock and stuck out his leg for his father to hold on to, which he did, only for the boot to come off in his hand. He caught a hold of the bottom of George's jeans but by now he was beginning to tire and eventually let go.

Meanwhile the keeper's son arrived back down to the rock with a length of rope but by now Peter had drifted away from the rock and the rope proved to be too short. The boy's mother came down with a life buoy and threw it in towards the drowning man but by this stage he was too exhausted to catch a hold of it. He was still floating but the effort required by a non-swimmer to keep his head above water was beginning to take its toll. The fact that he hadn't sunk was later attributed to the zip jacket he had been wearing.

At this point, George made the incredibly brave decision to jump in himself. Somehow, he managed to thrash his way to the lifebuoy and got into it. Then he took hold of his father and hauled him half up onto the side of the ring. His father was saying *"I'm gone, son. I'm gone"* over and over. Kicking madly, George managed to get his father back to the rocks. In the meantime, an Englishman, lately arrived, and the

keeper's son tried to haul them up with the rope attached to the buoy but a large wave washed Peter away.

George struck out again and found his father who appeared to be unconscious. Again, he grabbed hold of him and struggled back to the rocks and again a wave washed his father away. This happened a third time, after which those on shore, refused to let a now exhausted George go back out again.

In the meantime, PK Jim Cahill had alerted the coastguard in Wicklow to the fact there was a man in the water. Jerry Kavanagh and Wally Hill were sent out immediately in an outdoor motorboat and arrived around ten minutes after the rescue attempts had ceased. Directed by Jim Cahill from above, they quickly found the painter and hauled him aboard, where they gave him artificial respiration but to no avail. It was less than four weeks since his workmate Thomas Brannick had passed away.

Peter's wife Mollie was left to bring up six sons and four daughters back home in Cabra, with ages ranging from nine to twenty-seven years.

Mollie and Peter Timmons and their ten children (Photograph courtesy Mary Timmons)

Sources:

Irish Independent 14th September 1942 and others
Irish Press 28th April 1958
Irish Independent 26th May 1967
Evening Herald 23rd June 1967
Irish Press 24th June 1967and others
Wicklow People 8th July 1967
Julie-Ann Brannick and Mary Timmons, grand-daughters

Jim Leydon, Michael McLoughlin and Michael Kilgallon, Blackrock, Sligo

Lighthouse hunters will know that there are two Blackrock lighthouses on the Irish coastline, one off the Mullet peninsula in county Mayo and the other off Rosses Point in county Sligo. (There was a third, if you count Blackrock Castle in Cork harbour, which blazed fires and later candles from the early 1600s to guide ships up the last leg of the harbour to the port)

The Mayo Blackrock is central to the story of Patrick Monaghan who disappeared from there in 1937 *(see page 177)* but this is the story of the 1972 catastrophe in Sligo Bay that claimed the lives of three men.

Blackrock lighthouse

From the eighteenth century, the Black Rock[6] off Rosses Point had been identified as a menace to shipping and, as such, a perch was regularly erected on the rock, which covered at full tide. However, this perch was also regularly knocked from its, erm, perch and so it was decided to do the job properly. A local builder from Ballina, Thomas Hamm, was commissioned to build a solid stone tower 51 feet high upon which was to be placed the Metal Man, a twelve-foot-tall statue of a petty officer.

Hamm completed his part of the deal in November 1819 but then the local merchants petitioned the Ballast Board for a lighthouse, rather than an unlit beacon, on the rock. The Metal Man statue arrived and was duly placed on the Perch Rock as a leading marker for the channel between Coney Island and Rosses Point.

It was not until 1834 that the stone base on Blackrock was converted into a lighthouse by the simple expedient of building a thirty-foot tower on top of it. This is why a red staircase leads from sea-level to the door of the lighthouse halfway up the

[6] Irish Lights on their official site uses both Black Rock and Blackrock. I prefer the latter.

tower and also why, from 1863 to 1970, the lighthouse was uniquely adorned with two paniers on opposite sides of the tower, to provide extra accommodation.

The paniers had been removed and the lighthouse was unwatched by Saturday 8th July 1972 when three local men - Harry Ewing (22), his older brother Robert (25) and teenager Andrew Gillen – set out in Harry's boat to do a spot of lobster fishing and unwittingly set off a train of events that was to end in tragedy.

The boat was a 28 foot recently purchased motor boat and all was going well until they neared the Black Rock when the large swell threw the boat up onto the rocks. Fortunately, the three young men managed to scramble to safety and, breaking down the unmanned lighthouse's door, sent up flares to raise the alarm.

These were spotted onshore by one Michael McLoughlin, (24), a local seaman who was due to join a vessel in Hamburg that week and was also due to be married later that year. Using Harry Ewing's old lobster boat, he single-handedly went out to the rock, where he picked up the three men and brought them safely back to the mainland. Harry Ewing was brought to hospital where he had seven stitches inserted in a head wound.

The retrieval of the boat from the rocks at Blackrock was the next priority and it was decided that it would be best to wait until low tide before setting out. Accordingly, shortly after midnight, six local men set off from the mainland, again using Harry Ewing's old boat. The men were James Leyden (58), principal keeper of Mayo's Eagle Island Lighthouse, a Rosses Point native, who had been shipwrecked in the war; Edward McLoughlin (56), principal keeper of all the lights in Sligo Bay and father of the aforementioned Michael McLoughlin; Kevin McGowan (25) from Rosses Point; Michael Kilgallon (25) a former seaman, now farmer; Michael McLoughlin, who had effected the rescue earlier in the day; and Charles Townsend (17) a local student and the only swimmer among the party.

PK James 'Jim' Leyden, 58, principal keeper of Eagle Island lighthouse who had served at many stations around the country, including the Fastnet. During the war, he had been Quartermaster of the infamous Arandora Star, *which was torpedoed with huge loss of life off Malin Head. (Photograph courtesy Sarah Jane Leydon)*

The group had nearly reached the lighthouse in a very calm sea and were just commencing their turn into it when they heard a sound like thunder and the boat was hit broadside by a giant wave, ten to fifteen feet high, that loomed out of the

darkness before they could take evasive action. All six men were thrown into the water as the boat capsized. After the wave passed, five of them managed to cling on grimly to the side of the boat. There was no sign of Jim Leyden at that point.

However, another large wave washed over them and this was the one that caused the damage. The men became separated in the darkness. Charles Townsend, who was proficient at life-saving, spotted the older Edward McLoughlin and managed to drag him to the boat. Kevin McGowan also managed to regain the upturned keel. Charles Townsend saw Jim Leyden clinging onto a buoy. The boat was being washed towards the rocks and he caught sight of Michael McLoughlin in the water. He stretched out a leg and Michael grabbed onto it and Charles hauled him in towards the boat but just at that moment, a third wave struck and washed him away.

With Edward McLoughlin now very weak and clinging on for dear life, Charles Townsend and Kevin McGowan kicked madly towards the lighthouse. Thirty yards from the shore, Townsend placed the rope around his neck and swam for it. Reaching *terra firma*, he hauled the boat and his two comrades in, aided by a now-obliging wave.

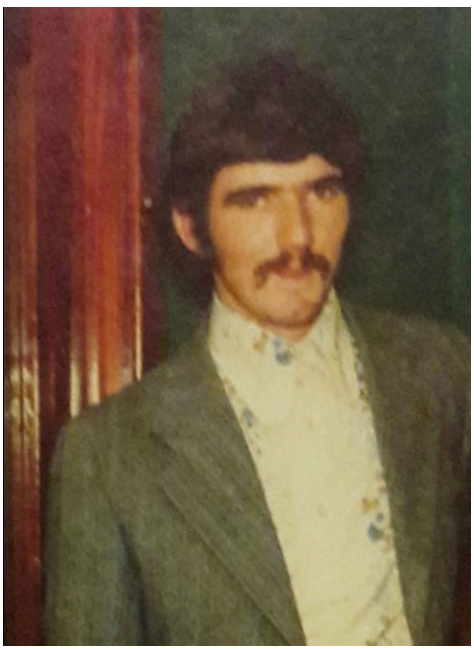
He then ran the seventy yards across the rock to the lighthouse which he ascended and found three flares unused from the incident the day before. While McGowan lit the flares, Townsend pushed the now very weak Edward McLoughlin up the steps of the lighthouse and into the tower. While there, they saw Michael McLoughlin's body briefly wash up on the rocks.

Michael Kilgallon (25) of Lower Rosses. He had spent time as a seaman but had recently returned to his native Rosses Point to work on the land. It was not immediately realised that he had been in the boat that fateful night. It only came to light when the survivors were picked up. (Photograph courtesy Alex Kilgallon)

On land, Kevin Murray immediately came out in his launch but, on reaching the rock, realised there was no hope of him landing. He therefore turned back to Rosses Point and returned thirty minutes later with Tom Martin in Frank Feehan's boat. A rubber dinghy was launched and the three men were brought ashore. Edward McLoughlin spent two nights in hospital suffering from shock and exposure. When he was released, he joined the search parties for the missing bodies, including that of his own son.

The body of Jim Leyden was found very quickly near the swimming pool. Wreckage was strewn all along the strand and the search for the two remaining bodies was concentrated there. Michael McLoughlin's body was found eight days later at Coney Island, a few hundred yards from the scene of the accident by John McGowan, one of the constant band of searchers who had kept vigil around the bay. Michael Kilgallon's body was found on the opposite side of Sligo Bay near Skreen.

By a terrible quirk of fate, the loss of the three men happened twenty-two years to the very day since six people were drowned crossing from Rosses Point to Coney Island.



Michael McLoughlin, 24, (left) of Clematis Lodge, who died in the Sligo Bay disaster and (right) his father Eddie, who survived. Michael had been due to join an Irish Shipping vessel in Hamburg a few days afterwards and was to have been married later that year (Photograph by Donncha Mac Niallais, courtesy Seán Mac Niallais). His father, Eddie, was principal keeper of the Blackrock and Oyster Island lighthouses. (Photograph courtesy Dymphna Caulfield)

Sources:
Sligo Champion 14th July 1972
Sligo Champion 21st July 1972

Thomas Jeffers, Inishgort

There are numbers in this world that have gained mystical properties. Three, seven, nine and thirteen instantly come to mind. Pi is another that probably occurs in nature more than we realise. Of the larger numbers, undoubtedly the most magical is 365. It is the number of lakes in Cavan, the number of beaches in Antigua, churches in Malta, windows in both Castletown and Mountshannon stately houses and islands in Lough Corrib. There are never 364 of anything, nor 366. The figure, in local folklore, always refers to there being one for every day of the year.

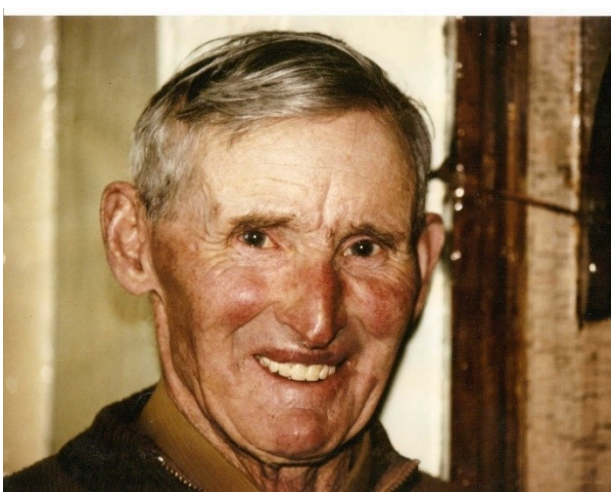
As such, the tourist office in Westport, county Mayo will tell you that there are 365 islands in Clew Bay and naturally there is little point in verifying this because, like the lakes of Cavan, the figure is probably fluid, with some of the smaller rocks disappearing and reappearing with the level of the sea at any one time.

Most of the islands were always uninhabited. Clare Island is the most famous, guarding the entrance of the bay; John Lennon bought a house on one in the seventies. Inishlyre still has a few inhabitants. And Inishgort has the lighthouse.

Some sort of navigation tower was erected at Inishgort by the Westport-based Marquess of Sligo in 1806 but the current lighthouse dates from 1827, marking both the inner channel into Westport and also the anchorage for the island itself. It is one of the outermost of the inner islands and probably one of the loneliest places in Ireland, due to its inaccessibility and the fact that it is so little known and thus rarely visited.

The island is roughly 27 acres in size and is joined onto nearby Island More by a causeway at low tide. It is probably unique in Irish lighthouse history in so far as one family – the Jeffers - has always attended the light, although CIL-appointed keepers have, of course, been stationed there.

The Jeffers had been on Inishgort since at least the first half of the nineteenth century, surviving on fishing and a bit of farming, seaweed gathering and helping out with the lighthouse. One petty court report from 1843 details a Patrick Jeffers, native of 'Inniscorth' being done for stealing seaweed from the shore, the property of one Patrick Browne. There were evidently other families on the island because co-defendants Bourke and Scahill were also listed as islanders.



Martin Jeffers (1910 – 1987) of Inishgort, lightkeeper for many years.

In biblical parlance, Patrick Jeffers begat James (1868 to 1948), who begat Martin (1910 to 1987), William and Tommy.

Martin Jeffers was, for many years, well known in the area as maintaining and operating the Inishgort lighthouse. By the 1960s, he had moved to the mainland and the light was run by his brothers William (Billy) and Thomas. There was another family of Jeffers on the island – relations – but, hilariously, Billy and Tommy had nothing to do with them!

In his beautifully-written blend of fact and humour, *'Lighthouses of Ireland,'* Richard Taylor paints a wonderful description of the two men, a type that is rapidly disappearing from the Irish landscape. Physically and mentally hermits, they were unmarried and spent the days pottering around the island, tending their few cows and doing odd jobs. Their only real connection with the outside world was the weekly visit to the pub, where they'd have a few and then stagger home. Except that, for Billy and Tom, the staggering home involved a boat trip.

Billy, who was the *de facto* light attendant (although both brothers performed the duties) had respiratory problems, which eventually did for him in 1968. Naturally, in turn, Tommy took over and, according to Richard Taylor, became even more of a recluse than ever, with few friends outside of the Gibbons family on nearby Inishlyre. He was also *'the poorest man I ever knew,'* anxiously waiting for his paltry monthly cheque from Irish Lights to buy provisions and a few pints on the mainland.

Tommy Jeffers (Photograph courtesy of Bernie Curran)

Transport to and from the island involved a small rowing boat equipped with an outboard motor. The trip passed Inishlyre and landed at Rosmoney on the mainland around half an hour away. On the way home, Tommy would often drop into his relatives, the Gibbons, on Inishlyre, where a few further drinks were sometimes partaken of.

On the night of Saturday October 14th 1972, Tommy had been drinking in Westport with Joachim Gibbons, a local fisherman. They both had a few drinks taken and took a taxi back up to Rosmoney. Joachim got the boat ready for Tommy and saw him off. He appeared to be 'handling the boat well' according to Gibbons, though the taxi-driver maintained that he was struggling. Slowly the boat and Tommy disappeared into the blackness of Clew Bay

The beautiful Inishgort lighthouse from the mainland in 2012

The following morning, Billy Gibbons on Inishlyre was preparing to go to Mass when he noticed Tommy's body floating a few yards off the island. He brought him ashore and laid him out and then alerted the authorities. The oars of the boat were found not far from Rosmoney.

In Billy's opinion, Tommy had lost his oars and was attempting to start the outboard engine, which had become clogged with seaweed, when he toppled over and fell into the water.

The coroner, somewhat pompously and with little knowledge of how rural Ireland worked in the 60s and 70s, declared that if a man was not fit to drive a car, then he should be deemed unfit to drive a boat too. The fact that Billy and Tommy had made that journey a thousand times before, in similar circumstances, did not sway him from that notion.

It was, in hindsight, a lovely twist to the story, that the boat made its own way to the landing place by the lighthouse on Inishgort.

Tommy's lightkeeping duties were taken over by Martin Jeffers' son, Sean, who became the postman for the islands in Clew Bay. A non-drinker, by the 1990s, he was the last inhabitant on Inishgort. He died in 2006.

Following Sean Jeffers' death, the post of lighthouse attendant was taken over by farmer, fisherman and postman, Tommy Gibbons from Inishlyre. Sadly, he drowned after slipping into the water on Rosmoney pier in 2009.

Tommy Jeffers in lightkeeping mode. (Photograph courtesy June Mathastein)

Sources:
Mayo News 20th April 1968
Mayo News 21st October 1972
Western People 2nd December 1972
Western People 25th February 1987
Irish Independent 14th August 2001
Communication with relatives Carol Coaten and Tom Jeffers

One-liners – (no further information …)

On 15th September 1836 three men were drowned whilst returning from work on the rock due to the boat capsizing. – Commissioner of Irish Lights webpage for Rotten Island lighthouse, first exhibited in 1838.

The lighthouse at the picturesque Rotten Island off Killybegs in county Donegal (Photograph courtesy of Helen Gallagher)

Letter from George Halpin - … *the unfortunate accidental death of Assistant Keeper Andrew Butler at Kinsale lighthouse on the 22nd August 1840. He had been selected from the Tradesmen of the Corporation for (his) unvarying sobriety and industry and has left a family to suffer from his loss.* This death occurred in the same week as the Aran Island drownings.

From a Ballast Board report of 1859 – E. Lake, died suddenly at Tuskar Rock. Superannuation awarded to his wife, Catherine since 7th January 1841 and children Jane and Edward.

From a Ballast Board report of 1859 – L. Byrne, killed at lightship, Arklow. Superannuation awarded to his wife, Bridget since 18th February 1856

From a Ballast Board report of 1859 – *A man was killed last year on the Coningbeg lightship, falling off the Jacob's ladder, while trimming the lamps in a heavy sea.*

The drowning of Mort O'Sullivan Brohill, a father of six from Ballynacallagh is also believed to have occurred in the mid-1860s. His boat sank as he was transporting sand to the Calf Rock – Discover Dursey by Penelope Durrell. The date corresponds to the construction of the lighthouse there.

From the Derry Journal 26th October 1864 – *Greenock, Tuesday. The steamer* Britannia *from New York, with dates via Cape Race to the 12th inst., has arrived. When passing Inishtrahul* (sic) *yesterday at 4pm, she observed the ensign at the lighthouse hoisted half-mast. Lighthouse keeper supposed to be dead.*

Death certificate coupled with anecdotal information from Christopher Kates – James Fortune, 12-year-old son of lightkeeper, Thomas Fortune, swept off a rock by a wave at the Baily Lighthouse. Body found near Howth Harbour on 21st May 1882. Thomas Fortune had been the PK at Calf Rock when it was destroyed by a massive wave in 1881. In 1923, the *Drogheda Argus* reported the death of two boys at Howth, last seen *"descending Fortune's Rock, so called because over 30 years ago, the son of the lighthouse-keeper named Fortune was drowned there."*

55-year-old John Scallan, the keeper on Rotten Island, was killed in November 1887 after suffering an accidental fracture of the skull. Two years later, Hugh Dugan, the keeper onshore at the time of the Calf Rock destruction, suffered the same fate when he fell down the stairs of the keeper's house at Duncannon.

Civil registration records – John Gillespie, Clare Island Lightkeeper, 27, married Mary Anne Hurley, School teacher, 19, in April 1887. Mary Jane Gillespie was born to the couple in January 1888 at Clare Island. She died of TB in March 1889. Father John died at the lighthouse in July 1889 of a neglected cold / consumption. The widow, Mary, died of TB in September 1889 at the mother's house in Dunmanway in September 1889. The whole family were wiped out in six months.

Eight-year-old Helen Sarah Gertrude Butler, daughter of Ferris Point lightkeeper William Butler, died of diphtheria on the 6th November 1911. Sad but not remarkable, except for the fact that her six-year-old sister, Henrietta Mary May had died of the same illness the day before.

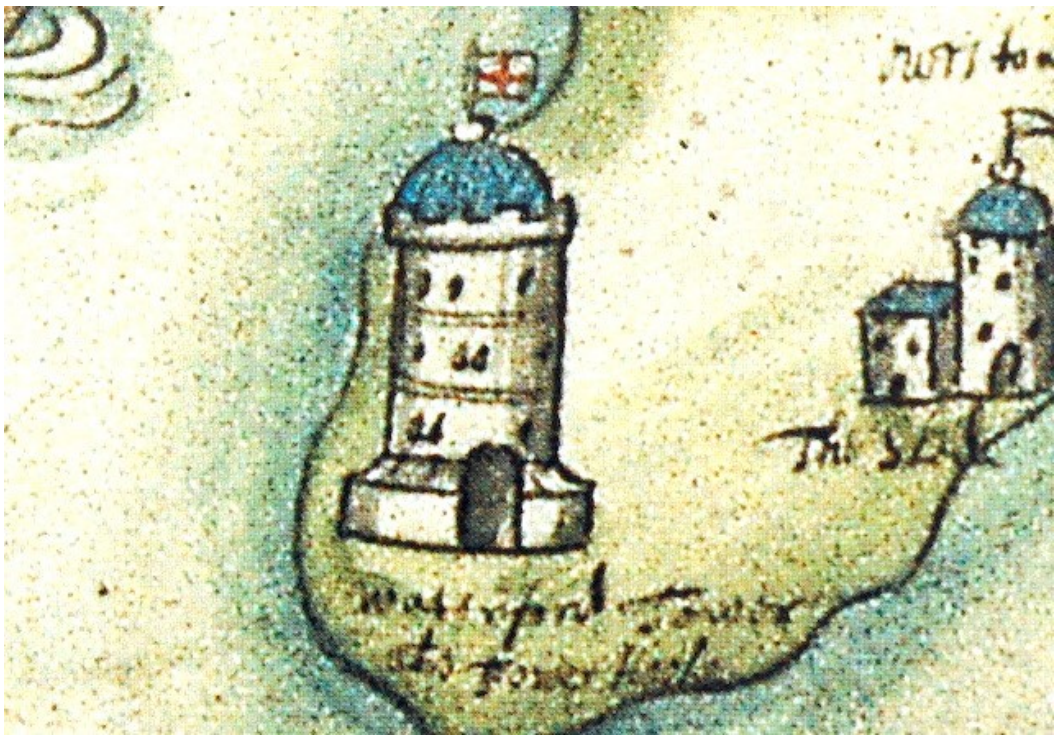
Irish Independent 23rd November 1918 – John J. McShane, 28, a single man from Donegal, died in Belmullet Hospital of the influenza pandemic ravaging the nation. He was assistant lightkeeper at Eagle Island, off the Mullet peninsula. (Aside from John, three other keepers died from the so-called Spanish flu in the period 1918-1919. They were Francis Carolan, 33, AK at the Howth Baily; Henry Murphy, 50, PK of the Spitbank pile light in Queenstown; and Daniel Twohig, 51, PK of the Tarbert lighthouse.)

From *"A maritime history of County Wexford"* by John Power - *The death occurred on 24th February 1913 of William Delaney, aged 48 years, a member of the Irish lights. He was serving on board the South Rock lightship off the Down coast up to the time of his death. William was the eldest son of the late Richard Delaney, Parnell Street, Wexford. Flags were flown at half-mast on ships in Wexford Harbour on receiving the news of his death*. He died of natural causes. Father Richard had been a lightkeeper.

From "*Light in the Darkness"* by Liam Clarke – *Henry* (*Higginbotham) became Master of the South Rock Lightship. He died 4th March 1921 on board from a heart attack. He was buried in Ballyphilip churchyard, Portaferry, hundreds of miles from his hometown of Wexford.*

And one more, from the vaults ….

Caesar Colclough and others, Hook Head



Hook Tower from a 1591 map by Francis Jobson

The ancient lighthouse of Hook has stood guard on the lonely promontory of Hook Head since the thirteenth century and there are many old stories about its origins.

John Bernard Trotter in his celebrated *"Walks through Ireland,"* published in 1812, tells the story of the existence of a castle prior to it becoming a lighthouse. The castle belonged to a noble lady who resided there with her two sons. When they were grown, they sailed away, as young buckos did and still do, to find their fortune and adventure. The noble lady desperately yearned for their return and spent most of her time gazing out of the castle window, hoping to see her sons' ships returning.

At length, she received tidings that the boys were on their way home and she suddenly realised that the castle was a kip, due to her having spent years gazing out of the window. Quickly, she set to dusting and cleaning and getting some decent food in, made up their beds, put up 'Welcome Home' banners, that sort of thing. She'd probably have tied a yellow ribbon around the old oak tree if all the trees in the area hadn't been cut down to feed primitive warning fires in the Dark Ages.

Unfortunately, the one thing the lady neglected to do was to put a light in the window of the castle as a guide for the returning ships. As luck would have it, the boyos returned to the Irish shore on a dark and stormy night. Not for nothing were

the seas off Hook Head known as the graveyard of a thousand ships and naturally the ships foundered, with all hands onboard, including the prodigal sons.

Grief-stricken, the lady vowed that, from that time on, the castle would show a light at night, so other mothers might be spared the terrible pain of losing sons to that treacherous coastline and so Hook lighthouse was born.

That story may or may not be true but the authenticity of another tale of death and disaster at the lighthouse cannot be dismissed as mere fabrication.

At the time that William III, also known as King Billy, or William of Orange, was on the throne, he was great friends with Sir Caesar Colclough, also known as 'The Great Caesar.' The latter lived at Duffry Hall in Wexford and was apparently loved by rich and poor alike for his magnanimous disposition and athletic prowess.

Caesar Colclough

One time, the King challenged Caesar to a game of hurling, saying that there were not twenty-one athletes in county Wexford that were the match of his twenty-one Cornish hurlers. Caesar took up the challenge and returned home, where he organised a friendly match between the Scarroghs and the Beany Boys. The former hailed from south of the River Scar, whereas the Beany Boys grew a lot of beans around Forth and Bargy. The result of the match is unknown, but Colclough then picked twenty-one to go and hurl the English. Or maybe, he simply selected the ones that were left alive.

Now, the Great Caesar was keen on a wealthy heiress named Redmond who lived at the Tower of Hook and the feelings were reciprocated. Prior to his departure for England, he went to see her, and she promised to keep a light burning in her window to make sure his ship found its way up the river on its return.

The upshot was the lads went to Richmond in England and, fortified with a shot of Irish whiskey, they beat the bejaysus out of the English, or rather, Cornish lads. To differentiate the two teams, the Wexford men tied yellow handkerchiefs around their

waists and the King and Queen were frequently heard to cry out '*Come on the yellow-bellies*!' which is how the county got its nickname.

On receiving his winnings, the Colclough was keen to get home and sail his boat up the river, so the victorious party set off immediately.

Every night, Lady Heiress Redmond had been clasping her hand to her bosom and gazing out at the blue waves that would soon bring back her bonny. Every night she had kept a candle burning for him, praying he would not be long.

On the evening of Colclough's return, the sea was calm and barely a breeze rippled her golden hair as she gazed outside before lighting the candle as usual. Suddenly, she heard the most beautiful music she had ever heard and, entranced, fell into a deep swoon.

On waking, many hours later, the weather had turned nasty. A gale was blowing and the violent sea was crashing against the rocks. To her horror, she realised that the candle had gone out and she fancied she heard Colclough's cries of despair above the racket of the terrible storm.

Quickly, she ran to her father and roused the household staff, but it was too late. Colclough's ships foundered on the rocks beneath the castle and only two men were saved, neither of whom happened to be Colclough, despite his athletic prowess.

The salient fact that I have omitted from this story is that, sometime previously, Colclough had destroyed a *rath* (an earthenwork mound) belonging to the fairies and they were desperately vexed at him. (Another version has it that the fairies were vexed by the Colclough family pillaging the Church at the time of Henry VIII, which frankly is a long time to be bearing a grudge.)

One of the survivors told that, prior to the ships being wrecked, they too had heard beautiful music and had followed a light, but it had proved to be a false light. All of which made sense of the light in the heiress' room being extinguished and herself falling into a deep sleep. The fairies had put out the light and raised the storm and now they had their revenge, with a serious downturn in bean production around Forth and Bargy an unintended side-effect.

Like the noble lady many centuries before her, the good lady vowed to keep a light burning in the castle to save the lives of all the poor sailors and a light has shone there ever since. She would not leave the Tower and soon began to waste away. Before she died, she made her father promise to continue her lightkeeping duties.

The salient fact that Caesar Colclough and King Billy were barely contemporaries – Caesar (1696 – 1766) was six years old when the Dutchman died in 1702 - does not in any way detract from the absolute veracity of this story. Nor does the fact that the Redmonds sold out to the Loftus family in the 1650s create any timeline problems where fairies are involved.

Legend has it that, at the other end of the country, a whitethorn tree belonging to the fairies was cut down to make way for the construction of Inishtrahull lighthouse in 1818, and bad tidings were visited upon all involved, including architects, construction workers and lightkeepers.

And I would certainly not dispute that.

Sources:
Wexford Independent 8th and 12th April 1865
The New Ross Standard 26th August 1949

Afterword

Handing over the keys of the Baily lighthouse to the Commissioner of Irish Lights in 1997, the six lightkeepers drew an end to a chapter of Irish lightkeeping that stretches back at least 1500 years. The lights have not gone out but the heart and soul that kept them beating has.

While there were lightkeepers, a lot of the history of lighthouses was safe. Towers were regularly painted; dwelling places upgraded; tiny piers maintained. The keepers not only kept the lights. They kept the history of the lighthouses intact too.

But now they are gone, how do we preserve this part of our maritime heritage? Our magnificent sentinels of the sea are slowly being replaced by extremely efficient but extremely soulless LED lights while the towers in whose shadow they stand, are left to a large extent to the elements. Already this century – in an era when preserving history is much more at the top of our agenda than ever before – we have lost the Alexander Basin East Breakwater lighthouse in Dublin port; the *LV Skua* at Arklow; the *LV Guillemot* at Kilmore Quay; the Castlemaine Beacon at Rossbeigh Point in county Kerry (since rebuilt at a new location); the Gun Rock light at Inishbofin and the Horse Rock lighthouse in the Shannon. Many more are seriously under threat from lack of TLC – Passage Point in county Waterford is on its last legs; the Towereen Bán at the entrance to Dingle Harbour gets smaller every year; the *LV Kittiwake* is rotting away in a Dublin dock.

And even where the lighthouses themselves are locked up and secure, the lightkeepers' dwellings, many of which rang for centuries with the laughter and tears of generations of families, are slowly succumbing to the elements – Greenore, Bull Rock, Scattery Island, Broadhaven and many more are fast approaching the point of irreparability.

It isn't all doom and gloom though. Through the Great Lighthouses initiative, the Commissioner of Irish Lights have tapped into the tourism potential of a dozen lighthouses around the country; local history groups and enthusiasts in places like Fenit, Rosslare, Killybegs, Inishbofin, Blacksod, Roaringwater Bay and others are actively working to preserve the maritime heritage in their localities by raising awareness on social media and lobbying their local councils. These are our new bright lights that we should be following, supporting, encouraging and helping.

Otherwise, the lights will truly start to go out.

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